

Alternative Hi(story) of the SIT Flats
a re-appraisal through anecdotal fragments

by

Lee Hui Lian

HT095846W

B.A. (Architectural Studies)
National University of Singapore, 2009

Dissertation submitted to the Department of Architecture in
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARCHITECTURE
at the
National University of Singapore

September 2009

Alternative Hi(story) of the SIT Flats
a re-appraisal through anecdotal fragments

by

Lee Hui Lian

HT095846W

Dissertation submitted to the Department of Architecture
on 11 September 2009 in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Architecture

Abstract

This dissertation explores spatial stories of the pre-war Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) flats through anecdotal fragments and biographical accounts in its architectural history. As a pioneering public housing project in 1920s Singapore, the SIT flats were the first signs of modernity in the domestic character of Singapore's housing development history. As such, its domesticity, which is conceived in opposition to modernity, has been largely suppressed. However, fragments of its domestic nature still linger, striding between the unnoted and the legitimate, as these flats are interspersed in the landscape of Singapore's public housing today.

The SIT anecdotes necessitate story-telling, which in turn relate to the construction of spatial stories. These stories resist conformity to a generic historical narrative. A *fragment* in historical reference points to a subject that provides alternative views to sanctioned history. The anecdotal which is a fragment, thus opens up possibilities to reinterpret the official scripts. As Michel de Certeau's argues, stories may start to erode the establishment of the *place*.

Through the selection of anecdotal fragments, the SIT flats will be re-examined through three specific themes – 'house of torture' visits the abject and fear in the context of Japanese occupation in 1940s Singapore; 'den of beauties' explores vice and infidelity through the façade of public housing; and lastly, 'madwoman' looks at how hysteria and taboo affect the perception of place.

By stringing these anecdotes together, my argument does not seek to turn perceived truths into historical artefacts. Rather, one may find in these historical fragments *alternative*, albeit controversial, modes of architectural knowledge and histories. Ultimately, these modes of knowledge would necessitate a re-appraisal of the SIT flats, on the basis that they are not merely mass housing blueprints.

Keywords: SIT, anecdote, alternative history

Dissertation Supervisor: Dr. Lilian Chee

Title: Assistant Professor

(total word count: 10,837)

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the following persons who have made the completion of this dissertation possible:

Dr. Lilian Chee

For your utmost dedication, guidance and encouragement through the entire process. I have never felt so enlightened and motivated to push the limits. I thank you for inspiring me with your wisdom, advice and thoughtful criticisms.

My parents and family

For trusting my decisions.

My dissertation group – Dawn, Joanne, Kenneth, Daniel

For sticking by me when I doubted myself. I have learnt so much from you.

Mien Huei, Vanessa, Hong Guan, Molly and Mun Yin

For being my extra pairs of eyes when I was blind. Thank you for your sacrifices.

Guardian angels – friends

For looking out for me when I faltered, accompanying me while I combed through the archives or went on site studies; more importantly, for shouldering my burden.

Oral History Centre (National Archives of Singapore), interviewees & correspondents

For your assistance in the gathering of crucial information

List of Illustrations

- p. 5 1
Part detail of 'La Parade' by George Seurat, 1888, oil on canvas.
[Source: <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/S/seurat/paradetl.jpg.html>]
- p. 13 2
Escape Stairs at the rear of the pre-war Tiong Bahru SIT flats.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]
- p. 16 3
Front façade of pre-war SIT flats at Tiong Bahru.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]
- p. 23 4
Section of pre-war SIT flats cutting through the lightwell.
[Source: House Development Board, edited by author]
- p. 23 5
Section of pre-war SIT flats cutting through entrance stairs.
[Source: House Development Board, edited by author]
- p. 26 6
Backdoor of pre-war SIT flats.
[Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dxsibo/3536710072/in/photostream>]
- p. 27 7
Jail door of Changi Prison.
[Source: <http://historymadeeasyatchangi.blogspot.com/>]
- p. 29 8
Rear image of the SIT flats along Smith Street.
[Source: *Chinatown: an album of a Singapore community*, p.128.]
- p. 30 9
Map identifying locations of Japanese Kempeitai branches and headquarters.
[Source: <http://maps.google.com>, edited by author]
- p. 34 10
Floor Plan of Smith Street SIT flats.
[Source: Fraser, J.M., 'Appenxid F', in *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*, edited by author]
- p. 37 11
Internal lightwell of the pre-war SIT flats.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]

- p. 41 12
A flyer for the Great World from the early 1950s.
[Source: Chan Kwok Bun & Tong Chee Kiong (eds.), *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*, p.165.]
- p. 42 13
Map identifying proximity of Tiong Bahru estate and surrounding sites.
[Source: <http://maps.google.com>, edited by author]
- p. 45 14
The “Leg Dance” from the 1930s.
[Source: Chan & Tong, *Past Times*, p.167.]
- p. 46 15
Front & Back Elevation of pre-war SIT flats.
[Source: House Development Board, edited by author]
- p. 49 16
Section of pre-war SIT flats cutting through entrance stairs.
[Source: House Development Board, edited by author]
- p. 51 17
Part detail of Section of pre-war SIT flats cutting through entrance stairs.
[Source: House Development Board, edited by author]
- p. 51 18
Photo taken from entrance stairs.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]
- p. 53 19
Living Room at Tiong Bahru SIT flats.
[Source: Fraser, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*]
- p. 53 20
Bedroom at Tiong Bahru SIT flats.
[Source: Fraser, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*]
- p. 55 21
Walter Benjamin sketch for The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1919
[Source: Anthony Vidler, 'The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary', in *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* by Anthony Vilder, p. 104.]
- p. 56 22
Back door of unit 01-30, Block 66 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]
- p. 57 23
Entrance of unit 01-30, Block 66 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]
- p. 58 24
Interior of unit 01-30, Block 66 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]

- p. 62 25
First floor plan of corner shophouse unit of pre-war SIT flats.
[Source: House Development Board, edited by author]
- p. 67 26
Unit 01-30, Block 66 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru.
[Source: Lee Hui Lian]
- p. 68 27
Toba Khedoori, *Untitled (detail of House)*, 1995.
[Source: Anthony Vidler, 'Lost in Space, Toba Khedoori's Architectural Fragments', in *Warped Space*, p. 157.]

| | |
|--|------------|
| Abstract | i |
| Acknowledgment | iii |
| List of Illustrations | iv |
| Contents | vii |
| Introduction | 01 |
| Chapter 1: Of Anecdotal Fragments and Space | 05 |
| Anecdotal Fragment | 06 |
| Stories in relation to Space & Place | 09 |
| Chapter 2: The SIT Flats | 13 |
| An Architectural History of the SIT flats | 14 |
| Construction of Home – of Domesticity & Modernity | 17 |
| Reading into the Design | 21 |
| Chapter 3: Tales of the House | 26 |
| House of torture | 27 |
| <i>When a house is not a home</i> | 33 |
| Den of beauties | 37 |
| <i>House: staging the set</i> | 47 |
| Madwoman | 55 |
| <i>Taboo of a strangely familiar shop(house)</i> | 63 |
| Conclusion | 68 |
| Bibliography | 72 |
| Appendix | |

Introduction

All too easily history focuses selectively on particular parts of the past, excluding specific sections of the public, or even the public as a whole, in favour of highly legitimised histories of the State and institutional elites.¹

Being one of the pioneers in the historical milestones of Singapore's growth, the development of Singapore Improvement Trusts' (SIT) flats were the first signs of modernity in housing projects undertaken by the British colonial government in the 1920s. Often, historical records of the flats include physical built forms, style and typology. In these accounts the domestic nature of these flats are negated.² Recognition of the (dis)junction between the State's impositions of history and the individual's subjective experience is therefore crucial in engaging a holistic representation of this space. Today, we see traces of SIT flats interspersed over Singapore in areas such as Tiong Bahru, Queensntown, and the Old Airport Estate, where the flats take on iconic architectural roles, frequently defining the identity of these places. Yet, anecdotal

¹ Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Alicia Pivaro, Jane Rendell, 'Introduction: Narratives of Architecture in the City', in *Strangely Familiar: narratives of architecture in the city*, ed. Iain Borden (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p.12.

² For example, in Jane Beamish & Jane Ferguson, *A History of Singapore Architecture: The Making of a City* (Singapore: G. Brash, 1985), p.137., the development of the SIT flats was briefly inserted within the overall history of Singapore architecture, as written: "Various estates were designed in the emerging style of "workers housing" which was to become so prevalent from the 1930's onwards. (...) Built of reinforced concrete with flat roofs and windows which wrapped around the corner, these new buildings spelt the promise of the future. Inside the flats were small and basic, but they provided much better shelter than the shanty towns and slums in which the majority of the poor had to live in Singapore. (...) Their tell-tale external aspect of hollow concrete blocks easily identify them." See also Ernest C.T. Chew and Edwin Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.324–31. and Ooi Jin-Bee and Chiang Hai Ding (eds), *Modern Singapore* (Singapore, University of Singapore, 1969), pp.172-3.

fragments related to the SIT flats still linger, these striding between the unnoted and the legitimate. These popular chronicles, often domestic character appearing as rumours and hearsay, prompted me to consider alternative hi(stories) of the SIT's domesticity through its anecdotal fragments.

History is created where selected voices are amplified, and the exorbitant often silenced.³ In contrast, an anecdote allows us to enter beyond cosmetic portrayals of an architectural history. Jane Gallop appropriates the anecdote as a guiding principle in explaining theories, by demonstrating their relevance in presenting refreshing perspectives of reality. After all, the anecdote is seen as:

... an essentially popular or communal creation, the validity of which resides not so much in the accuracy with which it reports particular positive facts as in its ability to reflect the general reality underlying those facts of the general view of that reality. It (is) thus the true raw material of the cultural historian.⁴

The pre-war SIT flats first struck me as an architecture trapped in a different time period. Perhaps what captivates visitors is the quaint scale of the three-to-five storey walk-up – apartments that drew morphological references from the Chinese diaspora shophouses and the iconic back stairs – a stark contrast to the later developments of public housing.

³ Nirmal Purushotam, 'Silent Witness: The 'Woman' in the Photograph', in *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*, eds. Chan Kwok Bun & Tong Chee Kiong (Singapore Times Edition, 2003), p.33.

⁴ Lionel Grossman, 'Anecdote and History', in *History and Theory*, v. 42 n. 2 (May 2003) (Blackwell Publishing for Wesleyan University), p.159.

We are all spatial story-tellers, explorers, navigators, and discoverers, exchanging narratives of, and in, the city. Through the personal, the political, the theoretical, the historical we believe we are *revealing* cities in “strangely familiar” ways, but we are also creating cities as we desire them to be. Our desires frame our fragile understanding of architectural space.⁵

Like a pointillist’s painting, the multitude of *fragments* extracted through anecdotes from residents, archival records, blog entries and personal correspondences construct a larger historical narration of the SIT flats, all akin to complementary colours, opposite in meaning and value, yet necessary in the fabrication of the bigger picture through optical perception.⁶ In this case, these fragments form alternative historical readings that oppose or challenge factually recorded publications. By stringing together a series of anecdotes on the SIT flats, my argument is not to turn perceived truths into unquestionable historical artefacts. Rather I wish to argue that one can find in them alternative, albeit controversial, modes of architectural knowledge that necessitates a re-reading of these spaces. In my research, I find that scandals, taboo issues concerning death, psychological distress and wartime violence are almost always ignored or silenced in the SIT’s architectural history.

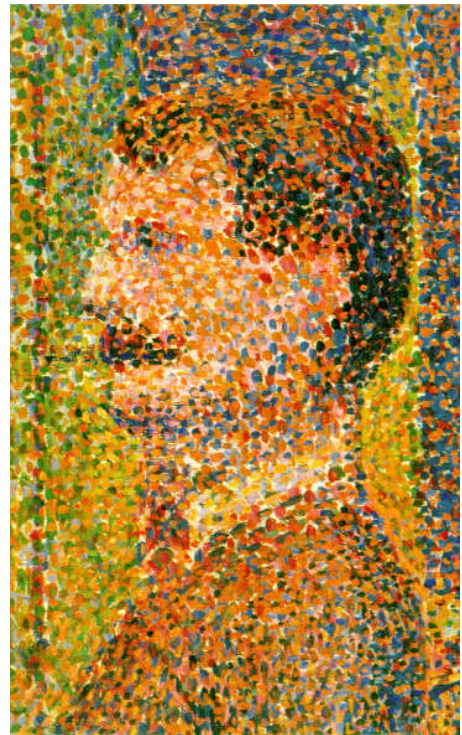
⁵ Jane Rendell, ‘Bazaar Beauties or Pleasure Is Our Pursuit: A Spatial Story of Exchange’, in *The Unknown City: contesting architecture and social space: a Strangely Familiar Project*, ed. Iain Borden (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), p.105. Emphasis mine.

⁶ Complementary colours refer to colours that of ‘opposite’ hues in the colour model, when both mixed in proper portions, they produce neutral colour of grey, white or black. The complementary colours serve to make each other brighter, for example the combination of red and green, or blue and orange.

This dissertation develops in two folds. First, I will sieve out anecdotal fragments that may be read parallel to the flats' history, and also examine the social backgrounds that create the settings for such anecdotes. Secondly, I will look into how the spaces are affected by such stories, and reinterpret their alternative or imagined spatial configurations. My selected anecdotes are categorised into three main themes: 'house of torture' visits abject and fear in the context of 1940s Japanese occupation, 'den of beauties' explores vice and infidelity, and lastly, 'madwoman' looks into hysteria and taboo of place. Juxtaposed against original orthographic drawings, I hope the additional interpretive layers will shift our understanding of such spaces.

Space is socially constructed. The history of the SIT flats is therefore a composition layered with sedimented tales, awaiting a story-teller. This is what the dissertation seeks to achieve.

CHAPTER 1: of Anecdotal Fragments & Space



1 Epitome of the Pointillist painting technique.

All that you may achieve or discover
you will regard as a fragment of a larger pattern of the truth
which from the separate approaches every true scholar is striving to descry.

- Abbott L. Lowell

While anecdote is the opening to history, anecdotes are characteristically embedded in larger, overarching histories. The teleological drive tends to make those larger histories, ironically, ahistorical.⁷

‘Once upon a time’, ‘it was a Sunday... a few years before war’, ‘abandoned more than 10 years’ – these are temporal cues that suggest vague but timely insertions in historical narrations, a trait of anecdotal accounts that belie an urgency to narrate *the* story and position of that story in time.⁸ Through theories of the anecdotal put forward by Jane Gallop, Michel de Certeau’s notion of spatial stories and the conceptual importance of fragments by Gyanendra Pandey, I will attempt to draw a link between anecdotal fragments, stories and space.

Anecdotal Fragment

A *fragment* in historical reference points to a subject that “provides a commentary on the limits of scientific history and the scientific historian’s search for truth”.⁹ Being a detached part, it suggests a belonging to a larger entity. It can be a physical trace which lingers in the present, or a narrative account that is often excluded from official histories. I emphasise the relevance of the latter in addressing my subject matter, the history of SIT flats. Drawing on Pandey’s concerns on revisiting Indian nationalist history through

⁷ Jane Gallop, ‘The Stories’ in *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p.88-9.

⁸ Gallop, ‘The Stories’, p.82.

⁹ Gyanendra Pandey, ‘In Defence of the Fragment’, in *Routine Violence: nations, fragments, histories* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2006), p.39.

fragments of events identified in newspaper accounts, testimonials, political leaflets and poetries among others, we see how literary narratives become a vital tool that not merely support such evidence but also suggest “another subject position arising from a certain experience”.¹⁰ Pandey discusses the strife between Hindus and Muslims in India’s political conflict, a situation often deleted from records but which continues to live on in person-to-person accounts, and inferred through reading the *fragmented* evidences found in poems and images. Pandey sees these fragments as important reflections of reality, and essential raw information that would have been otherwise censored. Likewise in this dissertation, the anecdotal fragment is employed to compose an untold, repressed or hidden history which is embedded in the historical fabric of the SIT flats.

An anecdote is usually a “short narrative of an interesting, amusing, or biographical incident”, interesting because it can transcend the barriers of serious theoretical debates.¹¹ It is likened to a secret history that is unpublished, and sometimes seen as excessive and trivial.¹² Although it emphasises a singular event or moment, the anecdote could be a micro-history within a larger ‘official’ history:

This contradiction between capturing the singular moment and a drive to insert the moment within a familiar plot may not (be) just a problem for the particular story but a tension intrinsic to the anecdote”.¹³

¹⁰ Pandey, ‘In Defence of the Fragment’, p.39.

¹¹ Jane Gallop, ‘Anecdotal Theory’ in *Anecdotal Theory*, p.2.

¹² Gallop, ‘Anecdotal Theory’, p.8.

¹³ Gallop, ‘The Stories’, p.85.

Through unravelling accounts buried and scattered in audio reels, microfilms and hearsays, I became the audience of untold stories as well as the narrator of alternative hi(stories). While seeking to understand the anecdotes, one consciously strings the logic of these fragmented stories, as explained by Gallop:

This classic storytelling gambit situates audience and narrator within a shared present moment in the aftermath of the story to be told. Such a gesture not only alludes to oral storytelling but also proffers the story as having happened, makes a claim to telling not only story but history.¹⁴

Gallop attempts to theorise the anecdotal story, elucidating that personal voice can present and be part of a theory. According to Gallop, anecdote and theory have diametrically opposing connotations with the former being more able to relate to people. By working with these two aspects simultaneously, the theory is “lived” and the subject is “theorise(d)”.¹⁵ Personal anecdotes are used to break boundaries of abstract theories and hence, anecdotal theory refers to the combination of narrative and theoretical frameworks. Gallop draws in accounts of others and of herself in order to demonstrate this intrinsic mode of knowledge dissemination, and to challenge the responsibility of official statements. While a theory may read into the significance of an anecdote, likewise, the anecdote clarifies the arguments of a theory.

¹⁴ Gallop, ‘The Stories’, p.82.

¹⁵ Gallop, ‘Anecdotal Theory’, p.11. Through the lens of anecdotal theory, the details of “lived experience” that are often overlooked or suppressed in historical records are theorised and discussed in architectural discourse.

The literary nature of anecdotes opens up possibilities to reinterpret the real, often prescribing intimate details that suggest a spectrum of representations. A recitation of anecdotes plays on “circumstantial detail” that distorts or reverses a well-known history.¹⁶ Though deemed insignificant, these details alter hierarchy of spaces, in turn “mak(ing) the commonplace produce other effects”.¹⁷ The parameters drawn in writing about histories can thereby encompass subjects that are taboo or scandalous, since anecdotes may be true or fabricated, and more virulently, exist as rumour and gossip. Arguably, gossip possesses the quality of being “unauthored, untraceable and unfixed” in historical time, allowing for twisted belief in its factual and political representations.¹⁸ Like an old wives’ tale, it has the relevance of the present within the trajectories of historical proof, an element of truth surreptitiously appropriated in the context. In short, the anecdote resists conformity to a generic historical narrative. It is a fragment of a story, told in context to a space.

Stories in relation to Space & Place

In a pre-established geography, which extends (if we limit ourselves to the home) from bedrooms so small that “one can’t do anything in them” to the legendary, long-lost attic that “could be used for everything,”

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, ‘Story Time’, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p.89.

¹⁷ de Certeau, ‘Story Time’, p.89.

¹⁸ Irit Rogoff, ‘Gossip As Testimony – a postmodern signature’, in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), p.269. This also follows the methods of Derridean deconstruction (referencing Jacques Derrida), that “(aims) to reveal the insufficiency of logical and rational structures such as spoken language to explain the world”, referenced from Jane Rendell, ‘Introduction: Gender, Space Architecture’, in *Gender Space Architecture*, p.234.

everyday stories tell us what one can do in it and make out of it. They are treatments of space.¹⁹

According to Michel de Certeau, stories are an inherent part of spatial practices, for they are reconciled with changes in space and allow us to imagine the transition of space from one to the other through the myriad approaches of narrative language. From descriptions of spaces in stories, boundaries are drawn and movements within these spaces are made manifest.

What happens to a place when it is tintured by the colours of narration? Through the rendition of the SIT flats by descriptive means, the spaces within or around the flats evolve. Drawing from de Certeau's 'Spatial Stories', we see the subtle differentiation in the meanings of place and space.²⁰ A *place* is drawn to a particular set of context, with 'proper' rules and a location that define it, therefore implying 'instantaneous configuration of positions' and indicating stability. A *space*, however, is subjected to considerations of 'vectors of direction, velocities and time variables' where it changes according to the assemblage of activities within it. As such, 'space' evolves within a given place when subjected to changes in context, time period or stories attached to it. By drawing parallels between de Certeau's definitions and the subject matter, we see how the establishment of SIT flats (in its official published histories) takes on the identity of a *place*, where supposed logical reasons are affixed to it. Meanwhile, where stories erode

¹⁹ Michel de Certeau, 'Spatial Stories', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.122.

²⁰ de Certeau, 'Spatial Stories', p.117.

the establishment of the place, one begins to seek alternative readings of *space*, projecting it perhaps into a series of fictional spaces alluded by one's imagination.

According to Brenda Yeoh & Lily Kong, a space is not a sheer "empty stage" but one that is imbued with a meaning, which is socially constructed and "necessarily invested with human meaning".²¹ The act of place making is not merely subjected to the physicality of the place. Rather, it transcends past occupancies and histories to include "those which reside in the imagination or even those which exist in simulations and iconographies".²² As such, it is necessary to sieve through this web of overlapping images and interpretations, to identify the jarring intersections between axes of personal and collective. This ultimately suggests that there can be no singular meaning to a place. Consequently, the SIT flats' history is a layered composition of "sedimented history": from the time it was known as the first public housing estate to accommodate the poor, to the time it housed the rich men's mistresses, and then, in recent years, when it took on a mantle of conservationism and became popular among yuppies who flocked towards it for its aesthetics and nostalgia.²³

Anecdotal fragments transform our perception of space. Its layers of subliminal readings may at times disrupt the logic of space. Through theories and methodologies of anecdotal fragment and spatial stories, the spatial representation of the 'real' SIT flats

²¹ Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, 'The Meanings and Making of Place: Exploring History, Community and Identity', in *Portraits of places : history, community and identity in Singapore*, eds. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lily Kong (Singapore: Times Edition, c1995), p.13. It is also mentioned by Jane Rendell, in 'Gender Space', in *Gender Space Architecture*, pp.101-2, that space is a "condition of social production", and that it is a continually "reproduced" through everyday life.

²² Kong and Yeoh, 'The Meanings and Making of Place', p.13.

²³ Kong and Yeoh, 'The Meanings and Making of Place', p.16.

maybe reinterpreted to reveal layered meanings that go beyond conventional readings of architectural space. As de Certeau delineates, "(...) narrated history creates a fictional space. It moves away from the "real" – or rather it pretends to escape present circumstances."²⁴ The act of narration transforms seeing into believing, thus "fabricat(ing) realities out of appearances" in the SIT flats' spatial constructs.²⁵ Governed largely by themes that address specific types of anecdotes, this dissertation seeks to construct alternative settings which account for how these anecdotes exist today. I will draw on historical and psychoanalytical references and with that, project my own interpretation of the anecdotes in relation to three spatial configurations, thereby crafting an alternative appraisal of the SIT flats' history.

²⁴ de Certeau, 'Story Time', p.79.

²⁵ Michel de Certeau, 'Believing and Making People Believe' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.186.

CHAPTER 2: The SIT Flats



2

... Pause awhile, island of kaleidoscopic pose,
consider your shattered hues, fragments of self
an uneasy finery, pieced in this repose,
and remember well, before the colours jostle, delve,
for this is plenty, this is poetry of place,
which lets no bulldozer bury, nor crane crucify.
This is the passing of a one-time grace
that art recalls, revives, without resupply.

These are gifts to a lived memory, a joy
from such exertions as mind and heart employ.

excerpt from Koh Buck Song, 'What Spirits Haunt',
in *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore*, p.7.

An architectural history of the SIT flats

In a typical understanding of architectural history, studies of buildings are carried out in terms of their physical built form, aesthetics, style and typology.²⁶ Architectural history is often biased towards “buildings financed by wealthy and influential patrons,” or those that have been commissioned by well known architects.²⁷ My study of the SIT flats seeks to challenge this conventional perspective, by not only drawing in the subject matter of the ‘common’, here referring to mass housing, but also presenting a heightened understanding of the flats through various social settings and intimate narrations.

As noted by Lily Kong & Brenda Yeoh, a place can be understood as a “repository of memories, comprising both individual constructions and shared narrative.”²⁸ It involves distilling the past and present details which are at times fused, exaggerated or abbreviated. A recognition of the (dis)junction between the state’s impositions of history and the individual’s subjective experience is crucial in engaging a holistic representation of the space. These readings suggest that the domestic interior holds fundamentally different spatial implications and functions than originally prescribed by the architect. As such, I will firstly delineate the ‘official’ version of the SIT flats’ history and then proceed to juxtapose alternative modes of architectural knowledge.

²⁶ Jane Rendell, ‘Gender, Space, Architecture’, in *Gender Space Architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction*, eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (Routledge, 2000), p.231.

²⁷ Jane Rendell, ‘Subjective Space: A Feminist Architectural History of the Burlington Arcade’, in *Desiring Practices*, eds. Katerina Ruedi, Sarah Wigglesworth, Duncan McCorquodale (London: Black Dog Publication, 1996), p.218.

²⁸ Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, ‘The Meanings and Making of Place: Exploring History, Community and Identity’, in *Portraits of places: history, community and identity in Singapore*, eds. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lily Kong (Singapore: Times Edition, c1995), p.17.

A predecessor to the Housing Development Board (HDB), the SIT was set up by the British colonial government in the 1920s to develop the first mass housing prototype. The SIT aimed to “provide for the Improvement of the Town and Island of Singapore”, which was carried out in the form of condemning buildings deemed unfit for human habitation and providing homes for those affected.²⁹ The idea of satellite towns was introduced in order to incorporate a ‘neighbourhood concept’ within the public housing schemes, an idea adopted from the British New Town planning where self sufficient towns were key to new housing estates.³⁰

In records of its pre-war establishment, the SIT’s development of Tiong Bahru in 1936 was considered a major achievement, such that it became a “blueprint for the future development of Singapore’s public housing”.³¹ This blueprint signalled a stoic representation and model, and became an instant pride of the nation. In the span of five years, the estate of 784 flats came to accommodate approximately 6,000 people which even included poorer Europeans.³²

²⁹ Jon S.T. Quah, ‘Administrative Reform and development administration in Singapore: a comparative study of the Singapore Improvement Trust and the Housing Development Board’ (College of Social Science, Florida State University, 1975, unpublished thesis), p.67.

³⁰ This will be further elaborated in the later part of this chapter in p.21.

³¹ Teo Siew-Eng & Victor Savage, ‘Singapore Landscape: A Historical Overview of Housing Image’ in *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, v6 1985, p.57.

³² However, due to other more important concerns as well as little financial aid and support from the colonial administration, the SIT had limited contributions to pre-war housing. See Cheng Seow Cheng, ‘Singapore Improvement Trust and Pre-War Housing’ (Department of History, National University of Singapore, 1995, unpublished thesis), p.18.



3 Front façade of pre-war SIT flats at Tiong Bahru.

The SIT flats were built during the transitional period crucial to Singapore's political, social and economic growth. Mass housing started during British rule, survived the invasion of the Japanese during the 1940s and lasted through to the declaration of independence in 1965. Caught in between these tumultuous decades, it was difficult to trace the changes in occupancy, although some tenants who live there today have been staying in the flats since the 1950s. Intimate stories passed down through generations were dismissed as hearsay and unusual incidents. Although illegal transfers of tenancies were briefly acknowledged, the actual tenancies of the flats remain vague.³³ For example, out of 276 tenancies checked by Trust Inspectors in 1947, 87 of them were recorded as "doubtful" and 14 of them "still under enquiry".³⁴ Also, despite setting out with the aim of housing slum dwellers and being one of the first multi-storey flats in Singapore, the sale of units was unsuccessful as prices were not met at the auction. Average middle and

³³ J.M. Fraser, 'Estate Section', in *The Work of The Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947* (Authority of Singapore Improvement Trust), p.36. The difficulty in conducting a thorough inspection of the existing tenancies was due to the lack of manpower.

³⁴ Fraser, 'Estate Section', p.36.

lower income groups simply could not afford the place which later became the 'area of the rich'.³⁵

Construction of Home – of Domesticity and Modernity

Domesticity, according to Hilde Heynen, is a conception of the 19th century, prior to which discussions into the distinction between the private and public spaces of the house were often collapsed into the neutral definition of a "large structure that comprised workshops as well as residential accommodation".³⁶ The domestic realm, gendered as feminine, was later conceived in opposition to the essence of modernity deemed masculine; the former associated with the private while the latter with the public.

The dichotomy between domesticity and modernity can be located in contextualising the SIT flats, where the notion of domesticity has been suppressed within the modernisation of Singapore, specifically in the rapid development of public housing landscape. The conceptualization of modernity, represented by written facts about the SIT's heroic achievements, embodies "gendered overtones", as put forward by Heynen who argues that "the gendering of modernity as male also resides in the heroes that figure in its narrative and in the specific sites that they occupy".³⁷ Conceived to deal practically with slum problems, the design of the flats drew references from "new architecture of the

³⁵ The SIT too, could not provide for adequate public housing due to the emphasis on other improvement plans such as the widening of roads or levelling of land as previously mentioned in p.15. By 1941, the flats were largely rented out, mainly to the higher income groups and to the Europeans.

³⁶ Hilde Heynen, 'Modernity and domesticity', in *Negotiating Domesticity: spatial productions of gender in modern architecture*, eds. Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Baydar (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.7.

³⁷ Heynen, 'Modernity and domesticity', p.2.

French, such as Le Corbusier, and of the Dutch, Germans and British”, with the use of reinforced concrete and flat roofs that “spelt the promise of the future”.³⁸ The SIT flats, the first signs of modernity in Singapore’s public housing history, were functional indications of “modernity and masculinity”.³⁹ The idea of the domestic, the “feminine”, was therefore overlooked in the architectural discourse:

We in the twentieth century have inherited this elusive concept of the home as an emotional refuge that transcends specific conditions and relations of housing... In order to consider how particular cultural values and expectations shaped housing as a new social institution, we must move beyond its characterization as a “private sphere” and explore the publicity of new housing practices. ⁴⁰

There is no singular image that represents the SIT flats. The call for uniformity and adherence to building codes meant that spaces within could not satisfy the varied needs of all people, making the flats seem like any other commodity, and forcing inhabitants to conform to the architect’s pre-established logic of space. Echoing Heynen, the idea of ‘homelessness’ is a distinctive trait of modernity, perhaps suggesting the impermanent nature of ‘home’, the *house* as merely a shell, or ‘a machine for living in’ and that *home* was often associated with “sentimental hysteria and dusty conservatism”.⁴¹ Feminist

³⁸ Jane Beamish and Jane Ferguson, ‘Period of Transition 1920-1940’, in *A History of Singapore Architecture: the making of a city* (Singapore: G. Brash, 1985), p.137.

³⁹ Heynen, ‘Modernity and domesticity’, p.2.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Blackmar, ‘The social meanings of housing, 1800-1840’ in *Housing and dwelling: perspectives on modern domestic architecture*, ed. Barbara Miller Lane (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.108-9.

⁴¹ Heynen, ‘Modernity and domesticity’, p.4.

criticism suggests a deconstructing of the house's rational structures to accommodate the reproduction of spaces through "consumption, appropriation and occupation".⁴²

The SIT flats have often been loosely categorized into pre-war and post-war phases, where the architectural history of the pre-war flats was recorded based on empirical evidence and official accounts such as survey, implemented schemes and establishment goals.⁴³ Plagued by constant change in tenancy and function, it becomes clear how the modernist idea of transience and 'homelessness', that once shook the very foundation of the concept of 'home', now manifests itself in the recorded history of the SIT – the inherited association to the 'homeless'. The replicated typology and anonymity of duplicated floor plans contribute to an ambivalent relationship between the architecture and the domestic realm, as how Henri Lefebvre, in addressing themes of everyday life and the nature of space, argues that the concept of everyday life is one that is "elusive", suggesting that with every image of stability there is a contradictory element of the "transitory and uncertain(ty)".⁴⁴ Within this ambivalence resides an opportunity to unravel the multi-faceted stories of domesticity associated with the SIT flats. These stories exist in embedded fragments and challenge the conventional notion of 'home', as portrayed by the recorded history of the SIT.

Narratives of personal experience become crucial sources in reconstructing the history of a place, even though these experiences may vary for different persons. Domesticity

⁴²Rendell, 'Gender, Space, Architecture', p.233.

⁴³ See for example, 'A History of Singapore Architecture: The Making of a City', p.137, 'A History of Singapore', pp. 324–31, and 'Modern Singapore', pp. 172–3. See footnote 1 of p.1 where this was previously discussed.

⁴⁴ Mary McLeod, 'Henri Lefebvre's Critique of Everyday Life: An Introduction', in *Architecture of the Everyday*, eds. Deborah Berke and Steven Harris (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p.13.

within the flats can therefore be discussed in terms of “legal arrangements, spatial setting, behavioural patterns, social effects, and power constellations”, opening up channels for a variety of discussions.⁴⁵ The imposition of activities beyond the socially accepted practice of domestic lifestyle rearranges the spatial relationships, “shifts the balance between public and private spaces” and expands the definition of home to accommodate not only ‘homely’ activities but to include a variety of leisure activities and work.⁴⁶ Home then becomes a “floating anchor”, where one does not necessarily need a place to escape from or fear, but rather a space in which one will “calm down, reconstituted, regain composure (and) remember”.⁴⁷ While these spaces evoke the idea of peace, they may also be sites where one may recall pain, heightened moments and negative exchanges. Does a home ever embody neutral spaces?

⁴⁵ Heynen, ‘Modernity and domesticity’, p.7.

⁴⁶ Heynen, ‘Modernity and domesticity’, p.19.

⁴⁷ Susan Bordo, Binnie Klein and Marilyn K. Silverman, ‘Missing Kitchen’, in *Places through the body*, eds. Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 75-6.

Reading into the design of the pre-war flats

The design of the pre-war flats originates from a modified shophouse plan with the exterior adopting the Art Deco style.⁴⁸ Traditionally, the architect performs the role of defining architectural spaces, crafting spatial experience that is either generic, or specific to the user roles within the space. One can only read architectural space through what is conventionally presented as legitimate architectural facts – orthographic drawings, statistics and factual records, thereby limiting the historicity of ‘space’. However, as one reads the SIT flats through gender theories, it opens up definitions of architectural production that enable a possible re-reading of the flats’ architectural history.⁴⁹

The new typology of mass housing introduced by the SIT represented a shift from earlier architectural articulations of public and private realms. Based largely on principles of post-war British New Towns where there was emphasis on small neighbourhoods and maximum privacy between individual homes, the intermediate parks and playgrounds were open areas to “improve public visibility and surveillance” by both residents and the authorities.⁵⁰ Unlike ubiquitous blocks of HDB mass housing prevalent today, these neighbourhoods were meant to be small towns, very much in line with the *kampung*

⁴⁸ Description of pre-war SIT flats can be found in Johannes Widodo, ‘Modernism in Singapore’, in *Modernism in Asia Pacific* (Paris: DOCOMOMO International Secretariat, 2003), pp.54-60.

⁴⁹ see Jane Rendell, ‘Introduction: Gender, Space, Architecture’, in *Gender space architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction*, eds. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, Iain Borden, (Routledge, 2000), pp.231-35.

⁵⁰ *Homes for the People: A review of Public Housing by The Singapore Housing Development Board* (Singapore: The Straits Times Press), p.40, cited in Brenda Yeoh & Lily Kong, ‘Place-Making: Collective Representations of Social Life and Built Environment in Tiong Bahru’, in *Portraits of places : history, community and identity in Singapore*, eds. Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lily Kong (Singapore: Times Edition, c1995), p.93.

typology of the indigenous Malayan residence.⁵¹ The low-rise walk up flats, four stories in height, was alluded to the British belief that “tall buildings were liable to interfere with their neighbours’ light and air”.⁵² Indeed, the quaint scale of the buildings provides for a certain “physical connectedness” that laid the grounds for social interaction and intimacy.⁵³ The intricate network of walkways and multitude of stairs, a distinctive architectural feature, runs through various clusters in the estate, forming a distinctive setting for a close-knit community.

There is a mix of shop units, restaurants on the ground floor and one to five room units above. Each apartment contained a small hallway area, a kitchen, two or three bedrooms and one bathroom.⁵⁴ In a contrast to the homogenous front facade, the most conspicuous elements of the pre-war SIT flats is found in its rear elevation through the distinctive art deco styled curved corners and the escape stairs that form rhythmic crisscross patterns next to the spiral stairs.

⁵¹ *Kampung*, a term taken from a Malay word which means village, refers to a cluster of human settlement or community.

⁵² Cheng Seow Cheng, ‘Singapore Improvement Trust and Pre-War Housing’ (Department of History, National University of Singapore, 1995, unpublished dissertation).

⁵³ Yeoh & Kong, ‘Place-Making’, p.107.

⁵⁴ Unlike current typology of HDB flats, there is no specially assigned ‘master bedroom’ within the SIT flats that could possibly suggest a higher hierarchy in spatial layout.

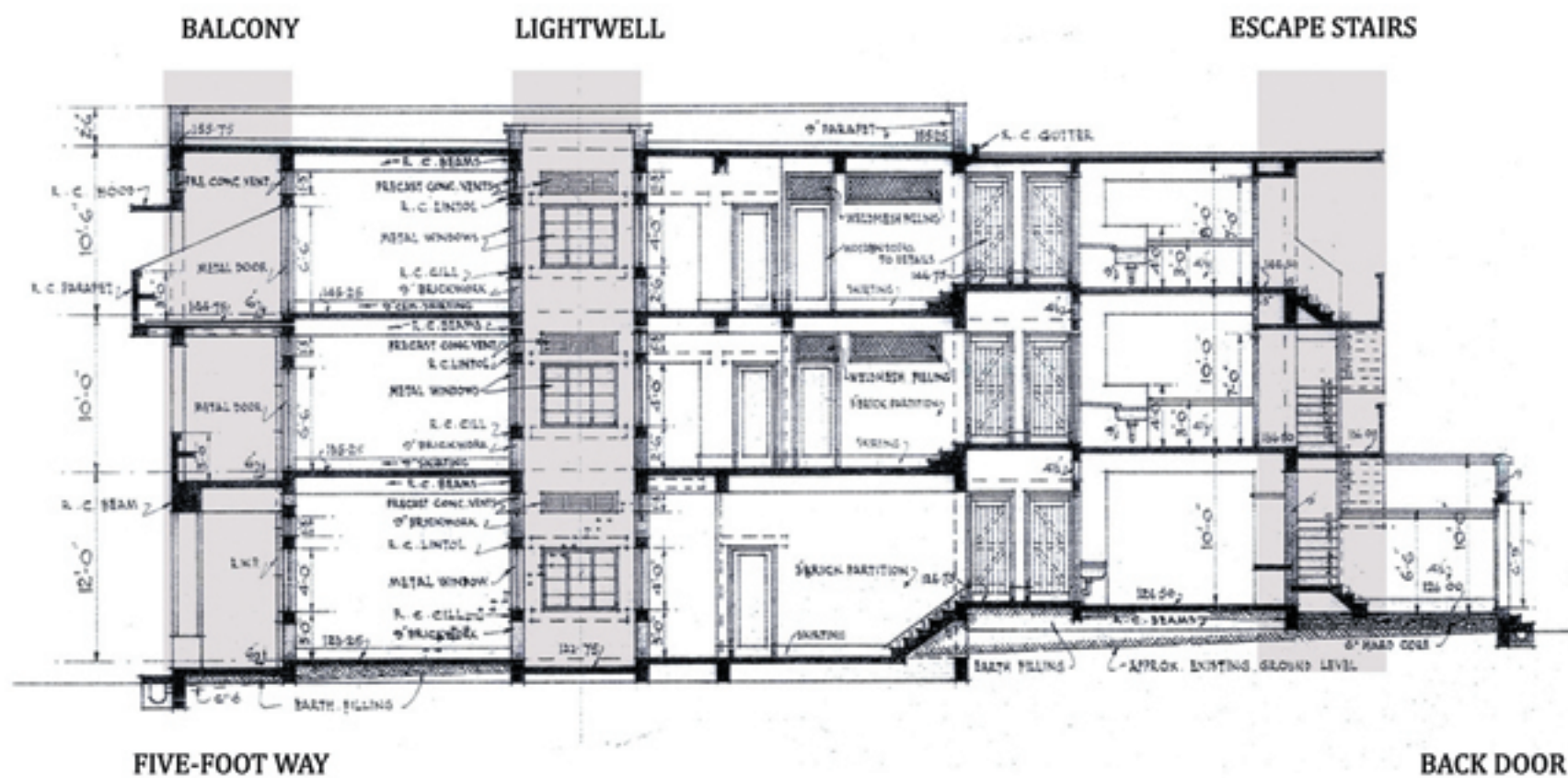


Fig. 4 Section of the pre-war SIT flats showing the lightwell.

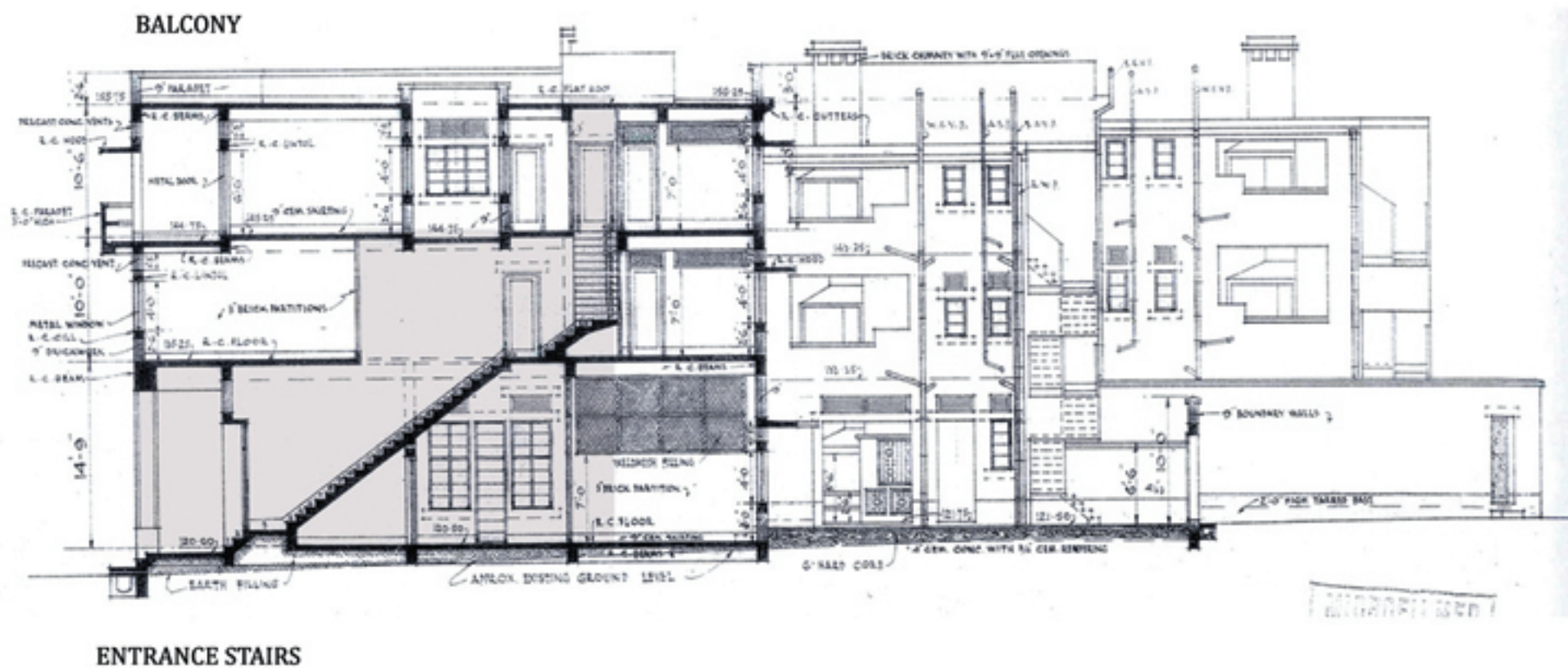


Fig. 5 Section of the pre-war SIT flats showing the entrance stairs.

Mosaic floor tiles of the interior and green frosted glass held together by wrought-iron window frames suggest an age old charm. Adjacent to every block of the flats at the rear is an open parking lot, which acts as a buffer to the vehicular traffic system. These car parks, dotted with mature trees and lush green shrubs, were once fields and playgrounds where children played under the surveillance of watchful mothers who perhaps stood on the stairwells or kitchens at the rear-end of the units. An entrance to the dwelling units along the five foot way is marked by a small opening that leads one up a flight of stairs. Drawing from the design of Chinese diaspora shophouses, there are careful considerations for ventilation as seen in the puncturing of light wells coupled with high internal volumes. Unlike the typical shophouse unit which contain one household within the building, the light well in the flats serves as a common light source for units located across the different levels; this visual connectivity breaks down the physical separation between neighbours on the vertical layer. The stairs that lead to individual units double up as corridors, becoming another transitional space between public and private realms. Beyond the door of each house is a totally private world, or so it seems...

The above descriptions were read through a functional method in order to demonstrate the formal approach used in discussing the architecture of the SIT flats. It serves as a prelude to the following anecdotes that challenge the readings of this space. As delineated, in the following chapter, I will project alternative modes of architectural knowledge by stringing together official histories and unofficial anecdotal fragments

surrounding the SIT flats. The fragments used here include published anecdotes, personal accounts via blogs or on-site interviews, testimonies from occupants, trial statements of prosecutors and witnesses as well as newspaper clippings. We see how the idea of a 'home' is challenged, when themes such as the abject, infidelity and hysteria start to contest this stereotypical concept. The critical value of these themes lie in their ability to reveal architectural history through "consumption, appropriation and occupation".⁵⁵

Among the earliest sites developed by the SIT for the mass housing projects, I have chosen two main locations – Tiong Bahru and Chinatown – as they contain multiple anecdotal stories.⁵⁶ These stories allude to theatrical stages for "the play of daily life";⁵⁷ stories are layered onto these spaces to create a secondary stage that goes beyond the blueprints of an architect's drawing board.

⁵⁵ Rendell, 'Introduction: Gender, Space, Architecture', p.233.

⁵⁶ These earliest sites also include Balestier and Queenstown among others.

⁵⁷ Heynen, 'Modernity and domesticity', p.19.

CHAPTER 3: Tales of the House



6

To Live is to Leave Traces...

There is an interior in the detective novel.

But can there be a detective story of the interior itself,
of the hidden mechanisms by which space is constructed as interior?

- Beatriz Colomina, 'The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism', in *Sexuality and Space*, p.72.



7

House of Torture

Housing, like building, is abysmal.

*It is because the house conceals the unhomeliness that constitutes it
that the “mere” occupation of a house,
which is to say the acceptance of its representation of interior,
can never be authentic dwelling.*

- Mark Wigley, 'The Violence of the House', in *Derrida's Haunt*, p.113.

House of Torture – the Kempeitai gaol

We felt justified when violence occurred in the realm of our “unsafe”; felt shock when it occurred in our “safe”.

Dora Epstein, ‘Abject Terror’ ⁵⁸

Interpreter: *He says one prisoner beat him on the hand and another put a nail in his foot.* ⁵⁹

...

Examination continued – *When you were beaten what were you beaten with? – Beaten with wood.*

Can you describe the wood? – Long wood like a stick.

And after you had been treated like this what happened then? – I was asked to return to my cell. The cell was very small and there were 13 persons inside it. The room was wet, and everybody was wet inside; urine was on the floor all over.

...

Can you tell us anything about the condition of these people? – Mr. Coulson was suddenly taken and badly beaten, and burning cheroots was also inflicted on his legs. When he came back he was all wet.

...

When the witness says that others were beaten does that include the women? – The women received slaps.

Swee Lye Huat ⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Dora Epsetein, ‘Abject Terror: A Story of Fear, Sex, and Architecture’, in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997), p.134.

⁵⁹ Here, prisoners refer to prisoners of war.

⁶⁰ Swee Lye Huat, ‘Evidence for the Prosecution, Fourth Day – Thursday, 21st March, 1946’, in *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, ed. Bashir A. Mallal (Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Off., 1947), pp.109-10.

Above is an account by Swee Lye Huat, who was transferred from the Y.M.C.A station to Smith Street West Branch District of the Japanese Military Police, otherwise known as the Japanese Kempeitai.⁶¹ Almost two years after the Japanese occupation in Singapore, the story opened again through the accounts of prosecutors and defendants in the Double Tenth Trial.⁶² It was a story rendered “hideous in memories by the clangour of war”, a time when the ruly became ironically unruly under the military administration of the Imperial Japanese Army.⁶³ Statements from 38 survivors of a raid on 10 October 1943, also known as the Double Tenth massacre, were recorded. This archive becomes an anecdotal source which tells of abjection and terror associated with the SIT flats.⁶⁴



8 The SIT flats along Smith Street that was built in 1938 and demolished in 1975.

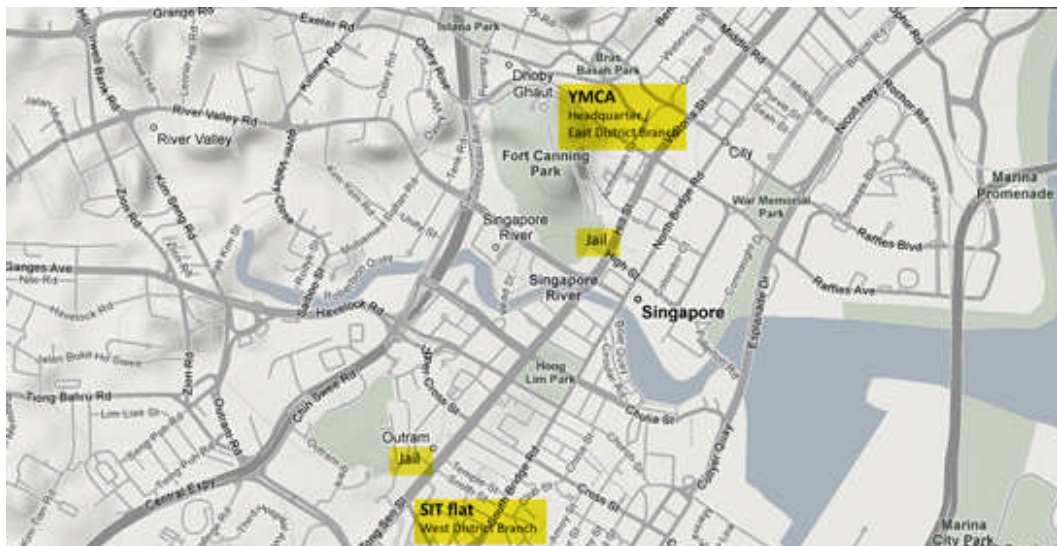
⁶¹ Swee Lye Huat was one of the witnesses for the prosecution of the Double Tenth Trial, who was transferred from the Y.M.C.A. headquarters to Smith Street. He was kept with British and American prisoners.

⁶² The Trial was held in the Singapore Supreme Court Building on 18 March 1946. It lasted until 15 April 1946.

⁶³ Bashir A. Mallal (ed.), *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others* (Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Off., 1947), p.6.

⁶⁴ The Double Tenth massacre that occurred on 10 October 1943 during the period of the Japanese occupation in Singapore (1942-1945) saw the Kempeitai arresting 57 civilians and internees on the suspicion of their involvement in a raid on Singapore Harbour. 'Double Tenth Incident', http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_111_2005-01-06.html (accessed 12 July 2009).

During the Japanese occupation in 1940s Singapore, the Kempeitai occupied existing buildings and converted them into district headquarters and temporary gaols. Among them were the Y.M.C.A., Smith Street SIT flats and White House Hotel, which were used as “officers’ mess, offices and cells”.⁶⁵ On the exterior, the SIT flats along Smith Street built in 1938 bear an uncanny resemblance to those still standing in Tiong Bahru (Fig. 8) According to historical recordings, they were altered following “typical alteration contract” and were occupied by the Kempeitai.⁶⁶ Just like the Tiong Bahru SIT flats, they were also one of the first test beds for housing the masses. Due to the apparent squatter-like environment of Chinatown in the early 20th century as well as a proliferation of vice activities along Smith Street, these flats were seen as a solution to the urban issues that plagued a densely populated area.⁶⁷



9 A map identifying locations of Japanese Kempeitai branches and headquarters

⁶⁵ Mallal, *The Double Tenth Trial*, p.245.

⁶⁶ J.M. Fraser, ‘Rehabilitation and Maintenance of Trust Properties’ in *The Work of The Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947* (Authority of Singapore Improvement Trust), p.25.

⁶⁷ Smith Street was known as a ‘red light’ area. No fewer than 25 brothels were operating along the street from 1901 till 1930.

It was common knowledge that the Kempeitai was very cruel. They used all sorts of torture. The two known places at that time from which the Kempeitai was operating was one, at the New Bridge Road, formerly having tenements in that building. They took over the building, and they operated from there, in the heart of Chinatown... Of course the people, know the reputation of these Kempeitai people. ⁶⁸

Where it was once a humble place of residence, the Smith Street flats became a confinement area where suspects were brought in for interrogation and subjected to torture.⁶⁹ It is almost unimaginable how a place of residence could become grotesquely stained with Kempeitai afflictions. The familiar safety of this dwelling was eroded, as it became a place smeared with tales of brutality and inhuman cruelty.

In the prosecutors' opening address at the Double Tenth Trial, we get a glimpse of how victims were treated by the Kempeitai officers, who were regarded as "monsters (that moved) in the dark".⁷⁰ By cross-referencing accounts from both prosecutors and defendants, a spatial imagery of the flats' interior may be constructed from within. These accounts highlighted the discomfort of countless people crammed in unhygienic rooms, and corridors become transition spaces of living to dying. One was tortured in the bedroom, as others awaited their fate. Paradoxically, the living room became a "living" room where one clings on to his/her life.

⁶⁸Charlie Cheah Fook Ying, 'Japanese Occupation of Singapore', interview by Low Lay Leng, 30 December 1983 in Oral History Unit, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 000385.

⁶⁹ See also descriptions of cells in other temporary Kempetai gaols such as the Y.M.C.A. in Lee Geok Boi, *Syonan: Singapore under the Japanese 1942-1945*, ed. Siow Jin Hua (Singapore Heritage Society, c1992), pp.73-7.

⁷⁰ Mallal, *The Double Tenth Trial*, p.235.

In my cell in Smith Street, which measured 6'6" by 7'6" there was Dr. Cecily Williams, a man called Jackson and a Chinese. The four of us shared this minute cell which had wooden floors and a stone slab one it on which was a pedestal W.C. connected to the mains. This W.C. provided the only water we ever got, in which we washed ourselves and used for drinking as well as having to use it for the usual purposes.

Mr. W.T. Cherry⁷¹

From statements such as this, we gain insights into what no one else would have known, of a space conventionally regarded as home, a sanctuary. When the goriness of a jail cell is juxtaposed with the sanctity of a bedroom in the SIT flat, we see the meaning of space, walls, floors and ceilings, shifting with social circumstances of their use.⁷² Walls that support and *protect* could, overnight, become boundaries between the dead and living, the feared and secured, between inequality and alienation. *"I heard him hiccougging for two days before he did die. I was in a neighbouring cell."*⁷³ These walls allowed one to vividly trace one's imagination through what was heard, perhaps providing temporary relief that one might be safer behind them. Just like how Peter Marcuse draws an analogy between protective walls around the Garden of Eden to those representing "an inequality between the power that controlled the gates and those excluded by them", suggesting that walls, given certain circumstances, begin to incarcerate those within their boundaries rather than protect them.⁷⁴

⁷¹ W.T. Cherry, 'Affidavits and Statements put in by the Prosecution at the trial', in *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, p.629.

⁷² Peter Marcuse, 'Walls of Fear and Walls of Support' in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997), p.102.

⁷³ E.G. Hebditch, 'Affidavits and Statements put in by the Prosecution at the trial' in *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, p.631.

⁷⁴ Marcuse, 'Walls of Fear and Walls of Support', p.103.

When a House is not a Home

Once more the cells re-echoed with his screams and shrieks of agony which continued throughout the afternoon. At 10pm, unable to walk, he was carried back to the cell.

Col. Sleeman⁷⁵

The inhabitants of a single building live a few inches from each other, they are separated by a mere partition wall, they share the same spaces repeated along each corridor, they perform the same movements at the same times, turning on a tap, flushing the water closet, switching on a light, laying the table, a few dozen simultaneous existences repeated from storey to storey, from building to building, from street to street.

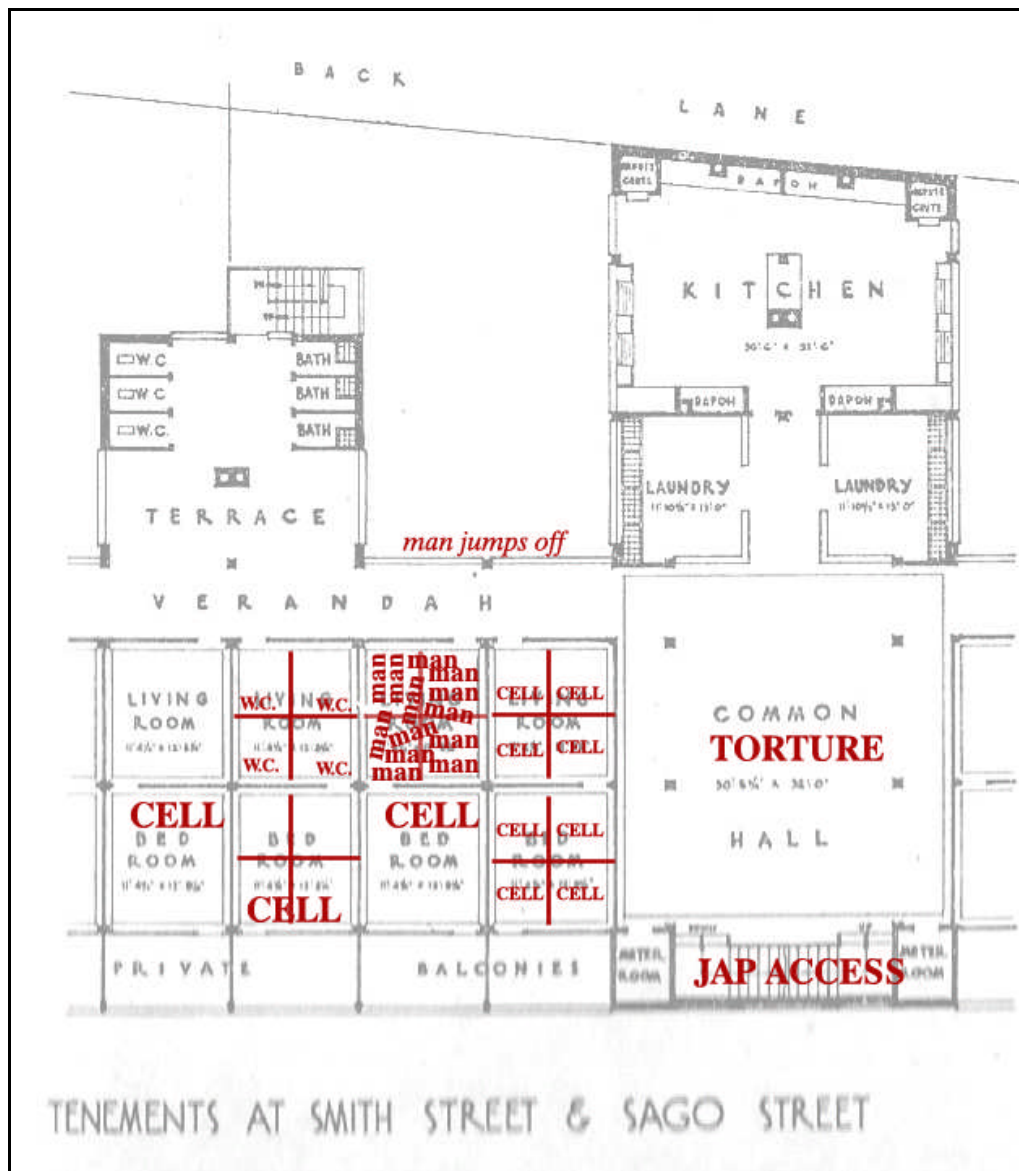
George Perec, 'On the Stairs, I'⁷⁶

To a person reading the two dimensional plans of a flat, a room within a house in a building is defined by bold strokes of lines marking the walls. To a passerby on the street, a room is concealed behind the facade of a building block. To a person living in the house, a room is perhaps an exclusive and private sanctuary. The idea of a dwelling is "intimate, immediate, a resonant chamber, a doorway to things beyond, a capacity of the senses and spirit."⁷⁷ To a person residing in a jail cell, a room is a transitory and restrictive space by which fear of death manifests itself, and where the strongest is reduced to an abject soul.

⁷⁵Col. Sleeman, 'Opening Address For The Prosecution', in *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, p.15.

⁷⁶ George Perec, 'On the Stairs, I', in *Life, a user's manual*, trans. David Bellos (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1987), p.3.

⁷⁷ Anne Troutman, 'Inside Fear', in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997), p.143.



10 A layering of readings extracted from the fragments of accounts superimposed on the existing plans of the SIT flats along Smith Street. The size of a cell as described is projected onto the space of the living room and bedroom.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ There seems to be a discrepancy between the plans of the flats and the exterior photographed image, and when compared to the plans of the pre-war flats in Tiong Bahru. However, due to the lack of sources, I have assumed the plans of this Smith Street pre-war flats taken from 'Appendix F', in *The Work of The Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947* (Authority of Singapore Improvement Trust), to be accurate.

Subjected to continuous questioning, victims in the Smith Street flats were tortured by methods unimaginable in the civilised world – drilling of nail into a plank through a foot, water torture by forcing victims to swallow excessive amounts of water, electric torture and constant beatings that cut into the flesh. These were frequent and even took place during the night. The flats instantaneously became synonymous with the house of torture, as its occupants suffered prolonged physical and mental torment. It was a breeding ground for diseases that spread in areas uncared for, reeking of faeces and damp in nature; victims suffered from beri-beri and dysentery. Human waste was drained together with the same water source that prisoners drank from, and many tried in vain to wash their clothes from the water closet pan. The need for personal space became compromised. Much like what was experienced in the Y.M.C.A. Headquarters, the flats resonated with shouts of interrogators and cries of agony.

By confining four people into this diminutive six-by-seven feet cell, the psychological implication of a claustrophobic space is in itself a repressive tragedy. This perpetuated distress from the symptom defined as an “abnormal dread of being in closed or narrow spaces” extends beyond physical torture into the realm of mental torment.⁷⁹ In this cruel irony, the archetypal differentiation between safe and dangerous becomes convoluted; partitioned walls were psychological screens that kept victims within recalibrated compartments of the interior house. What originally stood as a hierarchical distinction between gender roles in a house became a struggle between the extreme polarity of relationship, that of the powerful and the power-less. Here, “space turns upon itself,

⁷⁹ “claustrophobia”. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/claustrophobia>. (accessed on 7 September 2009).

encloses and focuses a human destiny”, thus defamiliarising the home.⁸⁰ Victims confined in a space and bounded by surveillance of power. The essence of dwelling falters, its status disturbed for one is no longer able to control one’s surrounding, or to be able to guard one’s intimacy and safeguard against intrusion.

Common architectural elements – door, wall, window, corridor – are overburdened with psychological dimensions. The abjection of the Kempeitai reached its apex when death entered the domestic realm. During the day, the inmates were subjected to physical endurance and confinement that had them sitting in upright positions for 12 hours a day with no room for relaxation, walking or for “putting hands on the floor”.⁸¹ The door, marking the threshold between two separate spaces, became physically defined by corpses, for “(it) was so small (that) they found some difficulty carrying the dead body out.”⁸² Almost like in a poultry slaughterhouse, prisoners crawled in and out of this trap door. The function of a window too, becomes distorted as it served as a place in which detainees were “strung up to by two fingers” while interrogations took place.⁸³ Thus, within every image of the *home*, as the Smith Street SIT flat shows, there resides the *house* that fear built. For many who survived the war, the flats would always bear imprints of tortured victims trapped in space.

⁸⁰Anthony Vidler, ‘The Explosion of Space: Architecture and Filmic Imaginary’, in *Warped Space: art, architecture, and anxiety in modern culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c2000), p.106.

⁸¹ ‘Appendix’ in *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, p.648.

⁸² Chan Yeng Fong, ‘Evidence for the Prosecution, Second Day – Tuesday, 19th March, 1946’ in *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, p.60. See also another instance mentioned in the ‘Opening Address for the Prosecution’ in the same publication, p.15, where it was described that “in order to get his body through the narrow entrance to the cage, they had to break his arms”.

⁸³ Robert Heeley Scott, ‘Evidence for the Prosecution, Third Day – Wednesday, 20th March, 1946’ in *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, p.96.



11

Den of Beauties

*The cyprian body was perceived as disorderly,
because as a moving female public body,
it flouted patriarchal rules for women's occupation of space.*

- Jane Rendell, 'Ramblers and Cyprians', in *Gender and Architecture*, p.143.

Den of Beauties

My flat has 3 street names. My father had 4 wives.

The family is a much, much bigger family because then people can marry many wives. And I happened to have a father who has got, if I can still recollect, four wives. My mother is the second. I think then there wasn't any bad impression on men with many wives because it's quite customary that people who do well have many wives.

Tan Peng Ann⁸⁴

Every Sunday night, about this time, ever since he acquired an Improvement Trust flat in Tiong Bahru, the merchant had made his journey along the main Tiong Bahru road. If anyone saw him, no-one minded. There were many others like him who visited Tiong Bahru when night fell. Some came on Mondays, some on Wednesdays, but most of them, in their glossy, expensive cars, came to Tiong Bahru on Saturdays and Sundays. Perhaps they preferred the night – daylight might unmask their identities.⁸⁵

The bold title “Tiong Bahru’s No. 3 wives” in the *Sunday Times* underscored an alternative milieu in which the SIT flats existed; words, dates, characters painted an imagery of vice revealed through the relationship between the residents and their

⁸⁴ Colonel (Retired) Tan Peng Ann, ‘The Civil Service – A Retrospection’, interview by Jason Lim, 7 August 2002 in Residence, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 002659/14. He stayed at 19C, Moh Guan Terrace, one of the pre-war SIT flats (the pre-war horse-shoe typology).

⁸⁵ Ken Jalleh, ‘Tiong Bahru’s No. 3 wives’ in *Sunday Times*, 24 July 1949. See Appendix for full article.

‘guests’. Descriptions such as the singling out of a ‘lone’ person at ‘night’, whose appearance seemed normal to the neighbours in that block, suggested that these activities were accepted, or rather known, to the community. The night masked their actions, the shadows of the unlit corridors a blanket to the true identities of the *guests*, who were in fact rightful owners of the units. Beyond the wall, the functionality of these spaces corresponded to the everyday routine of its users and their guests; perhaps on Sundays and Wednesdays, there were fresh flowers on the dining table to welcome *him*. Tan’s recollection of his father having four wives points to a situation unusual in today’s context but was a social norm then. These two anecdotes highlight incidences where the flats were being used to house mistresses of the rich.

Through chance encounters with residents and shopkeepers in Tiong Bahru, and through informal documentaries by resident bloggers, I was introduced to the arresting turn of phrase: ‘den of beauties’ or *mei ren wo* in Mandarin; the flats at Tiong Bahru reputedly where they kept their mistresses.⁸⁶ The SIT flats were thus inscribed with a duality of roles – one which housed families and the other which harboured vice.

In the SIT tenancy report, it was noted that there were many incidences where the occupants were not of those reflected in the tenancy record, and that these illegal changes in tenancies were a problem “impossible to deal (with) thoroughly”.⁸⁷ However,

⁸⁶ Several sources introduced this identity. For example, in Yeoh & Kong, ‘Place Making’, p.110, the authors cited a newspaper clipping from *The Straits Times*, 6 January 1985, which stated “... this Tiong Bahru district was known as *mei ren wo* [den of beauties]. The rich would reserve these flats for their own use, as a place where they kept their mistresses”.

⁸⁷ J.M. Fraster, ‘Report on period of British Military Administration September 1945 – March 1946’ in *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947* (Authority of Singapore Improvement Trust), pp.13-15.

the estate was known to be predominantly occupied by middle and upper class Chinese with few Indians and Malays, a prime location highly sought after by private companies. Its peripheral areas were colonised by occupants in slums classified as “lower class population, sometimes plagued by gangsterism”.⁸⁸ In a way, this estate was seen as a pristine area and during the 1950s, it was known as a residential area of the rich, often housing doctors and nurses, civil servants and other luminaries.⁸⁹ Additionally, the community of Tiong Bahru was close-knit and relationships were often based on trust, making it harder to conceal one’s identity within the community.

There was the Flamingo Night Club [at] Great World and the Great Southern Hotel in Chinatown. I can't remember which Straits Times journalist mentioned that when ST was at Kim Seng Road, they used to patronise the dance hostess at Flamingo - many lived in Tiong Bahru and/or Pacific mansion in River Valley Road. Great Southern - I think I [had] a coupon which enabled one to dance for 15 mins with a girl - I think [it was] for 50 cents or \$1 back in the 1950s. My neighbour was once the Flamingo club manager - he too [had] a wife and a mistress. My late grandmother once worked at Flamingo and from her I heard stories about mistresses who usually were dance hostesses before they became kept women.

Peter Chan⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Brenda Yeoh & Lily Kong, ‘Place-Making: Collective Representations of Social Life and Built Environment in Tiong Bahru’, in *Portraits of places: history, community and identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Edition, c1995), p.97. Newspaper clippings from 1940s-50s too, shed light on certain aspects of the flats’ occupancy.

⁸⁹ Yeoh & Kong, ‘Place-Making’, p.99.

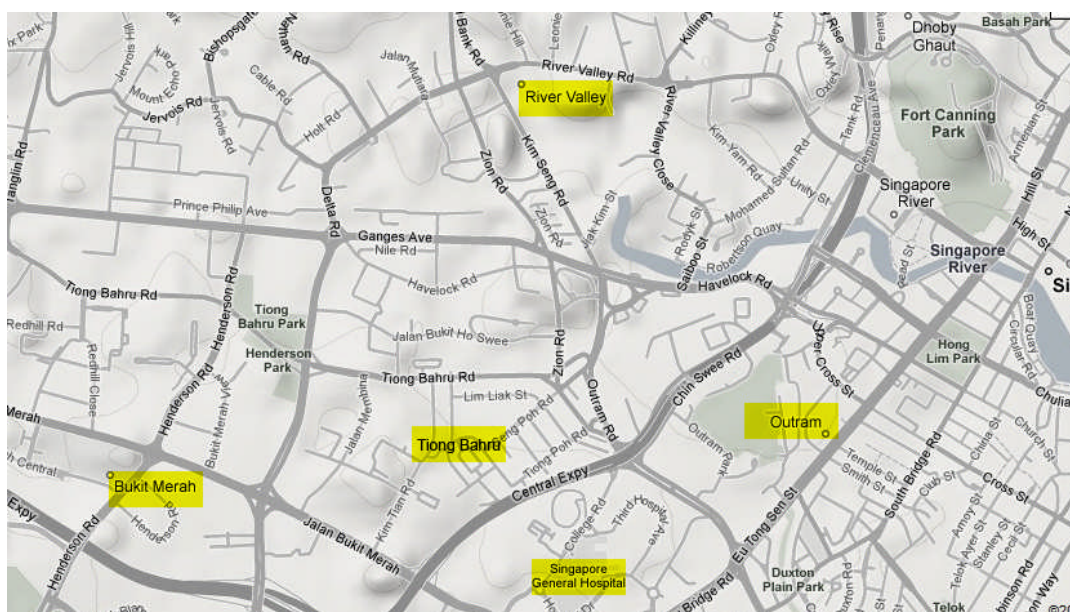
⁹⁰ Email correspondence between author and Peter Chan, (email dated 22 April 2009), introduced through a blogger Mr Lam Chun See, <http://sgblogs.com/entry/tiong-cantonese-would-part-peter-chan/230163>.



12 A flyer for the Great World from the early 1950s.

The revelation of these anecdotes point to a larger social mechanism, from the physical locality of the housing estate to jobs and roles of the people, intimacy of the household and perception of women in the context of 1950s Singapore. This necessitates an examination into the social mechanisms of commodity and consumption in order to unravel the association between women and vice. Thus, looking at the site context in the early 20th century, it is possible to locate several districts that supported these stories of exclusivity and commodification of women. Among them was River Valley, an area which till today, boasts of one of the estates where wealthy Chinese and European merchants moved in to.⁹¹

⁹¹ Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), *River Valley Planning Area Planning Report 1994* (Singapore: The Authority, 1994), p. 9.



13 Map identifying the proximity of Tiong Bahru estate and the surrounding sites.

Dating back to the 1860s when wealthy Chinese merchants bought abandoned nutmeg plantations and sub-divided the land for houses, this residential estate gradually expanded, and soon became an area where Straits Chinese who held positions of power moved into. Located at its heart was the Great World Amusement Park, *the* place for local entertainment and also the source of nightlife in Singapore during the 1950s and 1960s.⁹² The site, bounded by Kim Seng Road and River Valley Road on which the current Great World City Shopping Centre sits, once accommodated Chinese operas stages, boxing rings, cinema theatres, and notably a cabaret known to many as the Flamingo Night Club.⁹³ As Tiong Bahru is a mere kilometre away from River Valley, this

⁹² Amusement parks such as 'New World', 'Great World' and 'Happy World' were opened during the period of 1920s-30s, ushering a new concept of indoor entertainment adopted from Shanghai. These amusement centres were said to be "centralised, westernised, commercialised and multi-ethnic" and that "amusements were produced and consumed as commodities". See Yung Sai Shing and Chan Kwok Bun, 'Leisure, Pleasure and Consumption: Ways of Entertaining Oneself', in *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*, eds. Chan Kwok Bun & Tong Chee Kiong (Singapore Times Edition, 2003), pp.153-181.

⁹³ According to interviewee Tan Mok Lee, 'Special Project', interview by Thangaraju Ghalpanah, 26 July & 16 August 2002, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession no. 002674/5, one can only find recreation by going to Great World for movie screenings before the community centre started screening

proximity meant that it was convenient for the dance hostesses residing in the flats to make their trips to the said club on nights when they worked. It also meant that, the activities of pleasure could have been easily brought home; men who frequented the night club, could, in search of better privacy or exclusivity, locate the dance hostesses within these flats.⁹⁴ This controversy over hidden brothels within the realm of the SIT flats was highlighted when it was stated that “(m)uch publicitiy has been given in the Press to the fact that a tenant of an Improvement Trust flat turned his premises into a brothel”.⁹⁵

The suppression of these accounts in official history masks the fact that soliciting hostesses was a social norm acceptable then. The 1950s-60s is perceived with “nostalgia and sentimentality”, as Singapore was on the path to modernity and still held on to its landscape relatively unchallenged by tradition.⁹⁶ The notion of ‘family’ was a shaky one, for modern women were deemed a threat to the institution of family. These women obtained opportunities to work and some avoided marriage or the burden of child bearing. This was further compounded by a contrary opinion that “wealth, status, and prestige as ‘man’ was importantly tied to the institution of Chinese polygamy.”⁹⁷

the shows for 10 cents per entry. See also write-up in ‘Great World Amusement Park’, http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_1046_2006-06-09.html (accessed 1 August 2009).

⁹⁴ Brothels could, after all, range “from private dwellings used on a causal, ad hoc basis to enterprises established by municipal legislation”. See Ruth Mazo Karras, ‘Brothels, Licit and Illicit’, in *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.32.

⁹⁵ ‘Star-gazing in Tiong Bahru’, *The Straits Times*, 24 July 1948.

⁹⁶ Nirmal PuruShotam, ‘Silent Witness: The ‘Woman’ in the Photograph’, in *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore*, p.36.

⁹⁷ PuruShotam, ‘Silent Witness’, p.38. According to Selina Ching Chan in ‘From Dispersed to Localised: Family in Singapore 1819-1965’, p.63. of the same book, polygamy among the rich Chinese was commonly practised in Singapore in the 1940s. It was however noted that, the “secondary wife was not necessarily from a lower social class”, and that she could have been the man’s business partner.

In light of the social circumstances, preconceived notions of women primarily as home-makers slowly receded, eventually becoming irrelevant. Yet, given that the economic structure of 1950s Singapore was unstable, there were not enough jobs for all, and “waged work for women was scarce: occupations (were) importantly gendered activities”.⁹⁸ Poverty among women was borne out of this vulnerability.⁹⁹ Some resorted to “supplement(ing) (their) income by working in a nearby cabaret” while some succumbed to temptations of being the merchants’ wives “the moment he waved his dollar notes”.¹⁰⁰ Although the number of women worked in night clubs or served as social entertainers is unknown, many women took on ‘non-domestic roles’. Increasingly, the changing role of women transformed the spatial configuration of domesticity; the huge demand and supply of such women in the workforce (whether professionally or illicitly) called for a rearrangement of spatial hierarchy within the home.

However, to link the flats merely to the idea of prostitution seems rather tenuous, for the spatial boundaries drawn by the location of the flats in a ‘high class area’ seems to suggest an underlying social code of conduct which is normally associated with the proper, pristine and clean. Living in an estate deemed the area of the rich meant that these ‘mistresses’ learned the ways of upper-class women. It also meant that liaisons of these women with men who frequented the estate in classy limousines subjected her reputation to lurid sexual speculations. Unlike customers of prostitution, who are often nameless and faceless, these patrons of vice in the SIT flats belonged to a high social

⁹⁸ PuruShotam, ‘Silent Witness’, p.37.

⁹⁹ For jobs that are today classified as female dominant such as teaching, 73.4% of these workers were male then. However, for those women that were economically active, 49.5% of them were employed in ‘services’ while the rest constituted a range of sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and commerce. What resided in this category of ‘service’ is vague. Statistics from PuruShotam, ‘Silent Witness’, p.37.

¹⁰⁰ Jalleh, ‘Tiong Bahru’s No. 3 wives’.

strata – wealthy merchants who did not mind flaunting their wealth by conspicuously parking their luxury cars along the street.¹⁰¹



14 The “Leg Dance” from the 1930s.

¹⁰¹ Cecilie Hoigard and Liv Finstand, ‘The Main Participants’, in *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money, and Love*, trans. Katherine Hanson, Nancy Sipe and Barbara Wilson (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), p.25.

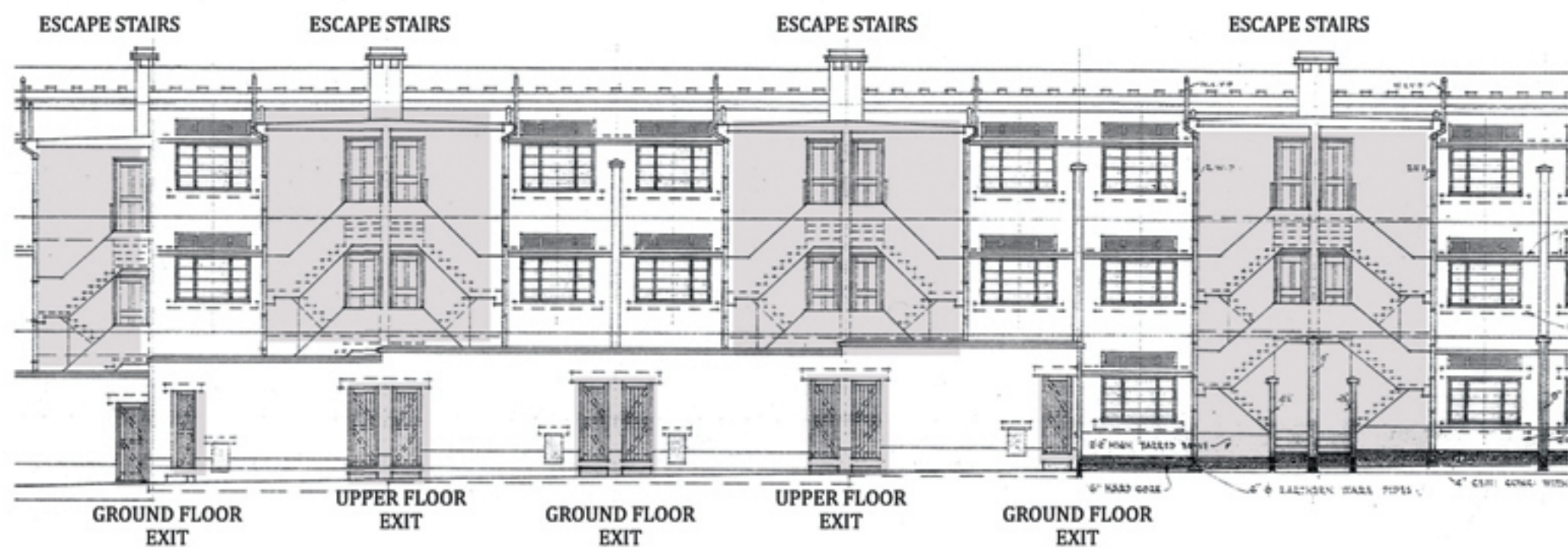
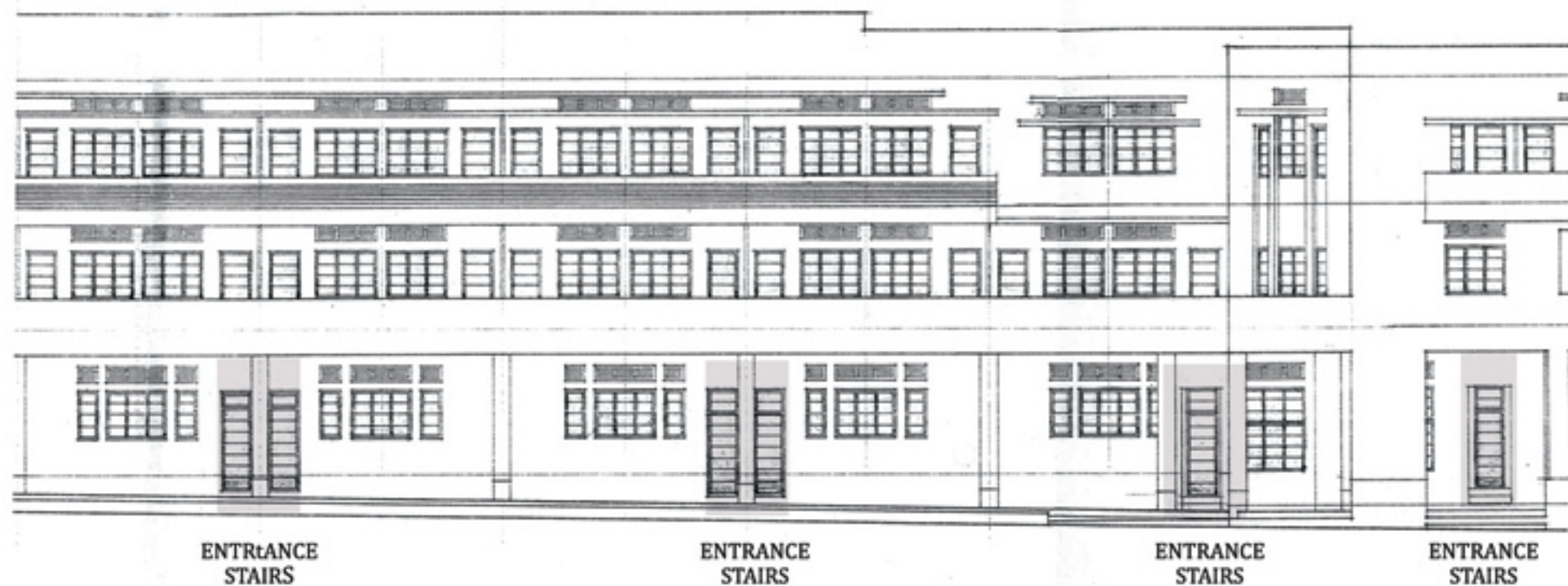


Fig. 15 (top) Part detail of front elevation of pre-war flats showing intimate scale in punctuations of entrances. stairs. (bottom) Part detail of back elevation showing pattern of escape stairs.

House: Staging the set

The SIT flats were a self-contained community intertwined within a relatively deep plan, an ideal nesting ground for illicit affairs. The homogenous front facade is in contrast to the textured rear exit (see Fig. 15 on previous page). As Karras describes, brothels exist in “private dwellings used on a casual, ad hoc basis (and) enterprises established by municipal legislation”.¹⁰² The simple, linear frontal elevation seems to mask the rear access points to the units on varying levels, while the stairs which dissect into the building block diagonally, serve as common corridors to selective access points.

The ‘den of beauties’, as the name implies, denotes the clandestine nature of this dwelling. It was a den, of an illicit community that was inconspicuously concealed within the facade of the housing estate. It sheltered ‘beauties’, hereby inferred as mistresses and prostitutes, a label which signals the commodification of women. Taking my cue from Jane Rendell’s analysis of Burlington Arcade where she identifies elements that suggest the complementary nature of architectural spaces and prostitution, we see how the production of space becomes a residue of social processes.¹⁰³ Women were owned as property, whereas men took ownership of space in this concept of “woman-as-

¹⁰² Ruth Mazo Karras, ‘Brothels, Licit and Illicit’, in *Common women: prostitution and sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.32.

¹⁰³ Jane Rendell, ‘Subjective Space: A Feminist Architectural History of the Burlington Arcade’, in *Desiring Practices*, eds. Katerina Ruedi, Sarah Wigglesworth, Duncan McCorquodale (London: Black Dog Publication, 1996), pp.217-233. See also Jane Rendell, ‘Bazaar Beauties or Pleasure Is Our Pursuit: A Spatial Story of Exchange’, in *The Unknown City: contesting architecture and social space: a Strangely Familiar Project*, ed. Iain Borden (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).

commodity”.¹⁰⁴ While women moved through space, they were the objects of exchange between men as sexual commodities.

Near a flight of stairs at the end of the road, the car stopped and the merchant stepped out. He went up the stairs and at the top of the first flight, knocked on a door on the right. Through a tiny peephole, a little maidservant looked out – and without hesitation let the merchant in. She knew him. This was Sunday – and on Sundays he always came to visit his third wife.¹⁰⁵

Space, intertwined with social interrelations at all geographical scales; from the route taken by a rich merchant from the next vicinity, to the path taken into the housing estate, to steps taken into the housing unit. Returning to the 1950s where the rumours first began, I projected the spaces against the social backdrop, defining the spatial boundaries that corresponded to the activities which evolved during that time frame. *Through a tiny peephole*, the inhabitants took a precautionary look of the immediate ‘outside’ zone, through an exposed crack in the door that allowed one to look out but not into. Like the peepholes placed on floorboards above five-foot-ways in Chinese shophouses, through these cracks ladies could survey oncoming visitors. In a way, the door here becomes the marker that separates vice and chaste. One had to have the password, the credentials to cross the threshold, with which, one would be welcomed into the flats *without hesitation*, suggesting familiarity.

¹⁰⁴ Jane Rendell, ‘Ramblers and Cyprians: Mobility, Visuality and the Gendering of Architectural Space’, in *Gender and Architecture*, eds. Louise Durning and Richard Wrigley (New York : Wiley, 2000), p.143. See also Rendell, ‘Bazaar Beauties or Pleasure Is Our Pursuit’, where similar content was discussed.

¹⁰⁵ Jalleh, ‘Tiong Bahru’s No. 3 wives’.

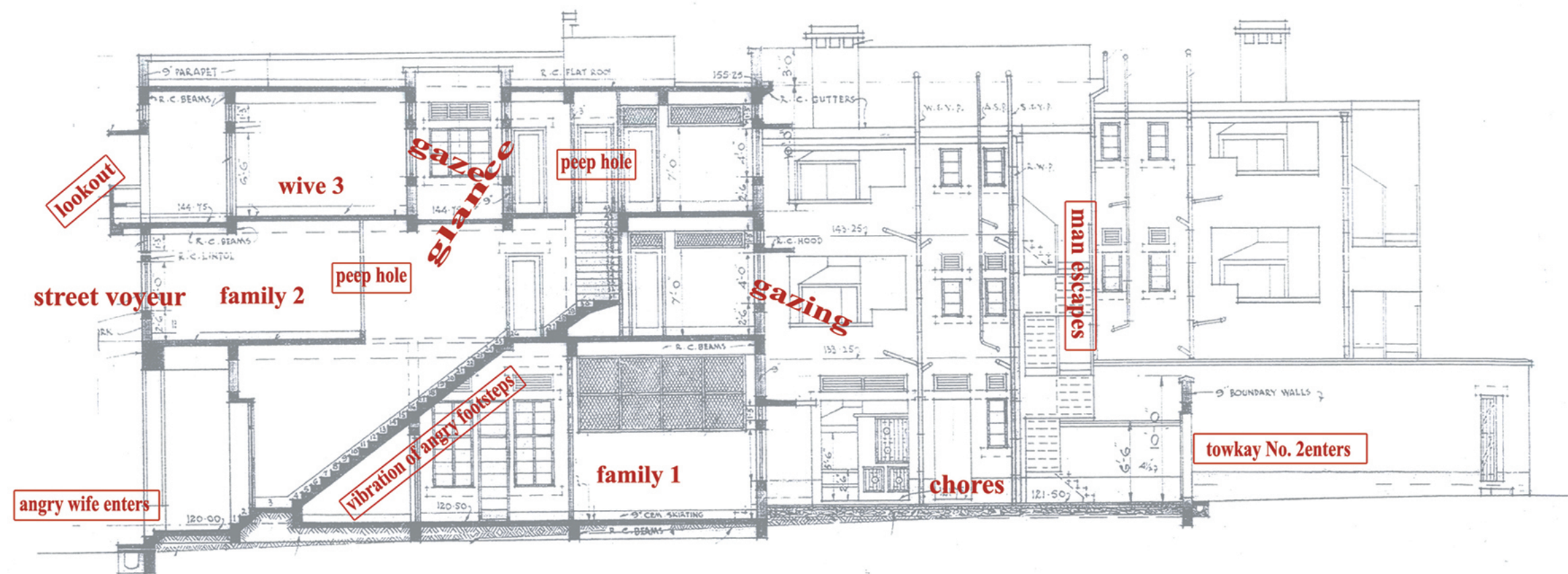
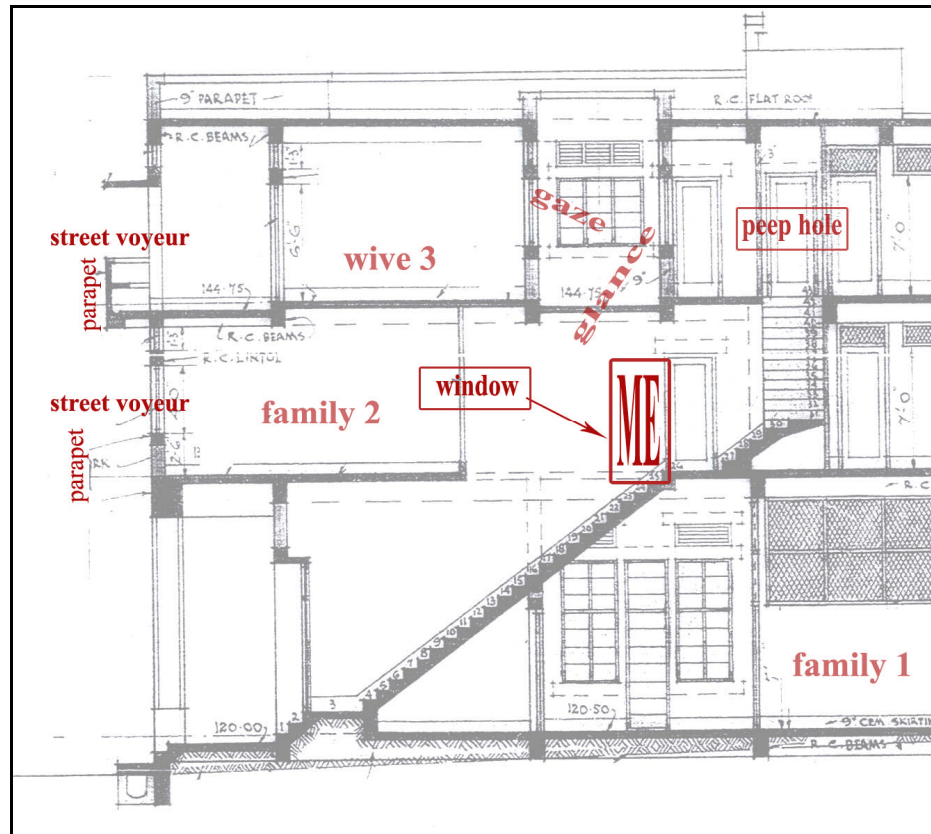


Fig. 16 Stories of spaces extracted from accounts overlaid onto the existing sectional spatial configuration, showing the possible usage and reconfiguration of spatial conventions.

By superimposing this spatial usage on the flats, the functions within are redefined temporarily, and this reverses the polarity of known spatial conventions. The kitchen located at the back becomes a transitional point of escape or a welcoming hall of vice. The intimate scale of punctuations in the facade seemingly invites yet forbids one to take another step. It renders the threshold of public and private realms ambiguous, as the permeability of spaces are interrupted with stairs that branch out to separate unit entrances. The escape stairs literally become the *escape* routes taken by merchants fleeing from suspecting wives who come charging from the main flight of stairs (refer to Fig. 16); it was also at times, entrances where merchants enter from.

As an outsider, I went up a flight of stairs towards one of the walk up flats along the Tiong Bahru estate. Before the dog-leg turn in the stairs leading to the unit, I looked back and noticed a 60cm-wide square window frame slightly above my eye level (see Fig. 17 & 18 in the following page). The placement of the window seemed odd, for functionally, it did not allow light to penetrate nor did it aid ventilation. If not for what seemed like a cardboard sheet behind the window panes, I could have seen right into the unit, or rather, I would have been subjected to voyeurism should I have chosen to continue straight on. Through the heavily frosted green glass, I could only make out a blurry silhouette of a figure against the light filtering in through the light well. The seven-foot wide balcony with parapets reaching up to the waist provided for a protected space for gazing; it was just right for one to look down but difficult for the person below to identify the gazer through the obstructed ledge.



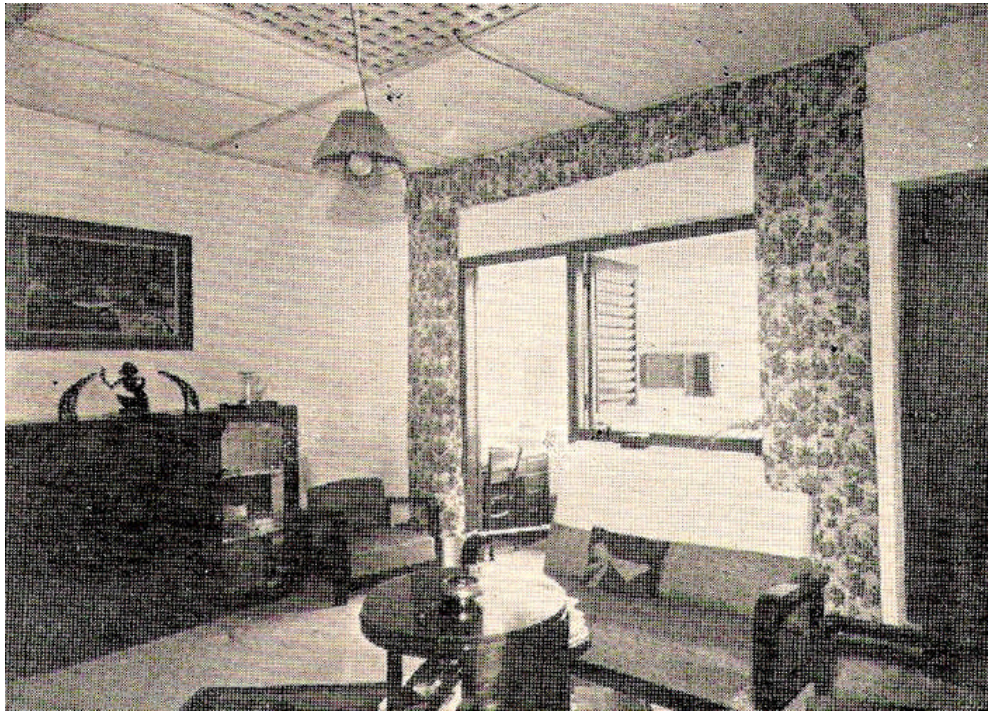
(above) 17 Putting 'me' in the picture as I attempted to identify the role of architectural elements in relation to the stories.

(left) 18 'Me' looking down from the flight of stairs, the corresponding window diagonally above me.

Taking precedence from a doctor-patient relationship, we see that the entry of a patient into a psychiatrist's office sparks off a series of subtle exchanges in power that is largely orchestrated by the very precise arrangements of objects within the room.¹⁰⁶ One approaches the room with a certain code of conduct, that is, a doctor is supposed to treat the patient and hence, one party is assumed to dominate over the other. The room may be any other room located within a generic building, but it is the placement of objects, the interior configuration of a 'setting' that matters. Like in Freud's office, the patient occupies the "spatial locus of power", that is enhanced by the exact placement of a mirror which provides an illusion of his centrality.¹⁰⁷ Thus, one then questions, what makes a place *the* place of a mistress, or *the* place of a prostitute? How does visual concealment take place on top of the need for security, and how is a vigilant watch-out zone placed within a given setting of these flats? The mistress's home would be unlike any other home, although the lack of a male figure in the house perhaps alters the notion of a home. Her identity comes under constant surveillance by others, especially the neighbours. And unlike a place for prostitution which calls for a space of transitory nature – a commodity that is paid for and consumed within a given time frame – the place for mistresses entails a dwelling space that crosses the boundary between vice and domesticity.

¹⁰⁶ Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders, 'Berggasse 19: Inside Freud's Office', in *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader*, eds. Mark Taylor and Julieanna Preston (Chichester: John Wiley, 2006), p.117.

¹⁰⁷ Fuss and Sanders, 'Berggasse 19', p.117.



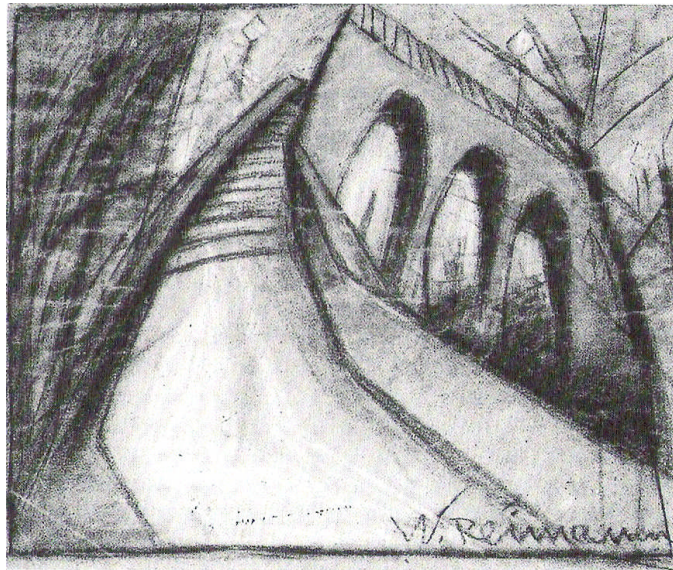
19 Living Room at Tiong Bahru SIT flats.



20 Bedroom at Tiong Bahru Flats.

Although things took a turn during the Japanese occupation, with the Great World Amusement Park briefly becoming a prison for Australian prisoners of war, and rich merchants were stripped off their wealth and status, the rumour about the 'den of beauties' lingered. Although many men could not afford to 'keep' their mistresses, a few wives "retained possession of their flats".¹⁰⁸ Today it remains a mystery whether physical traces of these mistresses remain.

¹⁰⁸ Jalleh, 'Tiong Bahru's No. 3 wives'.



21

Madwoman

*It is within the inner peripheries of the dwelling
– the hidden, disused, invisible, and newly discovered space –
that we may project feelings and activities to which we cannot or will not allow access in the course
of our “normal” daily lives, to which we may assign illicit behaviours and fantasies, anxiety and
apprehension.*

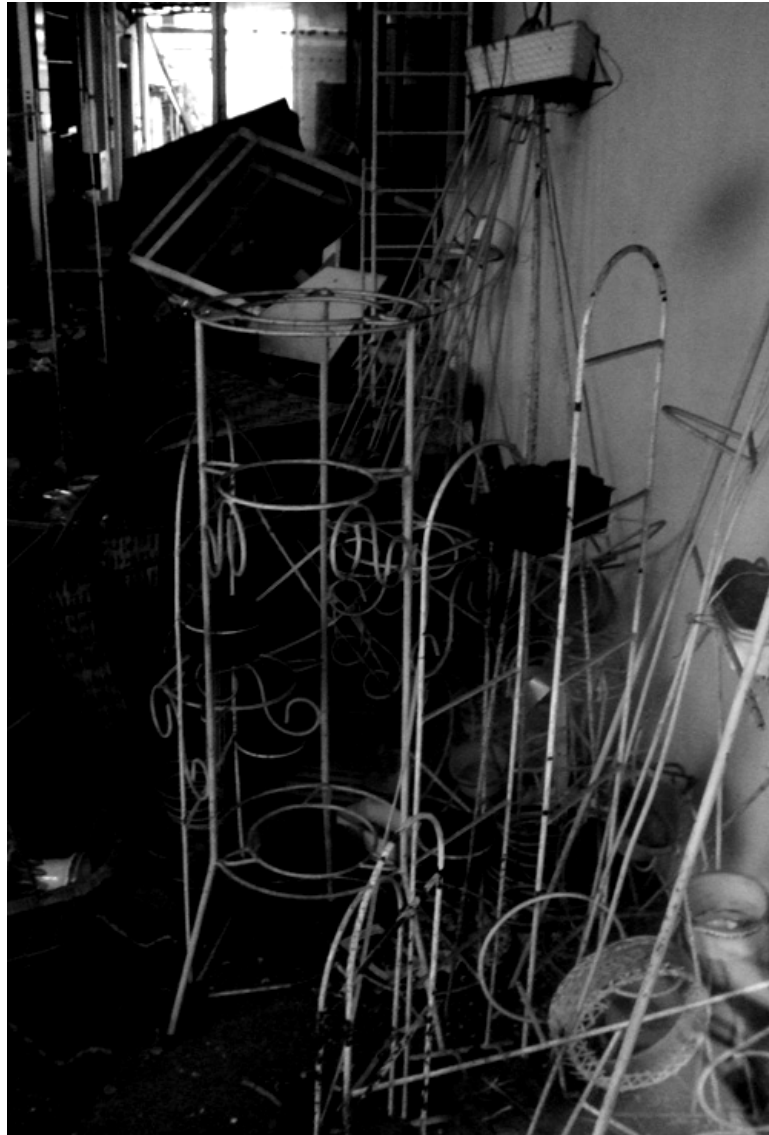
- Anne Troutman, 'Inside Fear', p.151.



22 The back door through which I entered.



23 The padlocked entrance.



24 Peering in from the entrance.

Unit 01-30 of Block 66, Eng Watt Street could have been any other place of residence or a shop within the Tiong Bahru estate. However, at a position conspicuously open to pedestrians but hidden by black tinted full length glass, the unit is now surrounded by rumours and myths. I was led on a wild goose chase as I attempted to hunt down the exact history and owner, but all I could gather were vague accounts about past occupants and two envelopes bearing the name “Sum Soh Moi” found in a dented letter box at the entrance.

The story goes like this: The corner lot had been abandoned for close to thirty years, for reasons unknown to a nearby resident.¹⁰⁹ All he knew was that it had been occupied by midwives during early days when the flats were first built, after which it became a flower shop. The florist was a lady reporter who later married a rich banker’s son. She was smart and beautiful, according to another resident.¹¹⁰ However, when her husband, a womaniser, showed signs of promiscuity, she became deeply affected. Somewhere along the way, she went mad. The unit has since been abandoned.

Unable to establish when exactly the story started, why the unit was left in that state of mess, how fear and hysteria came to be associated with this space, and most importantly, the obscurity of its past despite its curious condition, I was impelled to craft a personal narration of my experience in that unit, of which objects serve as fragments that aid in

¹⁰⁹ Interview with owner of Hardware Store “Hong Eng Hin”, 01-47, Block 71 Seng Poh Road, Tiong Bahru, 14 June 2009.

¹¹⁰ Interview with resident of unit 01-05, Block 73 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru, 14 June 2009. He has been staying with his wife in the SIT flat for over 40 years.

the construction of an anecdote; architectural elements as props of a story. This could be read as a fictional history, aided by psychological analysis and a societal view on taboo.

It took me three visits to that corner unit before I could gather enough courage to go beyond the entrance. I had to access the unit through the back door which was left eerily ajar. Despite the heavily tinted glass that made it impossible to peep into the shop from outside, it was surprisingly bright from within. I explored the space with a heightened sense of curiosity; my eyes picked up traces of objects which seemed out of place, my ears sharpened to detect any whispers or sounds, my nose sensitized by the musk of rotting timber and the stench of decay. Consciously, or perhaps unconsciously, I began to assign meanings to every surface, how things were placed, the angle, the visible and the invisible, until I started to equate the setting to particularly intense emotions – fear, madness, anger, haunting.

The shop front, or what was left of it, disappeared beneath the rubble and rummage of old books, cardboard boxes and food packets. Flower stands were strewn all over, cushioned faux leather chairs stood in the middle of the room alongside two long work desks. An overturned sofa told of anger. There were traces of broken rattan partition walls, empty shelves, cracked mirrors and flower pots. All these items were thickly coated in dust and were nesting grounds for spiders. A couple of paper lanterns, commonly found during the Chinese Lantern Festival, hung from the false ceiling. There was a piano too, at the corner of the room, set against a clear glass sliding door separating the carpeted interior and

the tiled exterior. The walls were stained brown. The colour reminded me of sickness.

Beneath the zinc roof, dangling precariously on rusty iron rafters over the once open space next to the kitchen, I found pieces of crumpled paper, of which the first sheet read:

Now it is hereby declared as the follows:

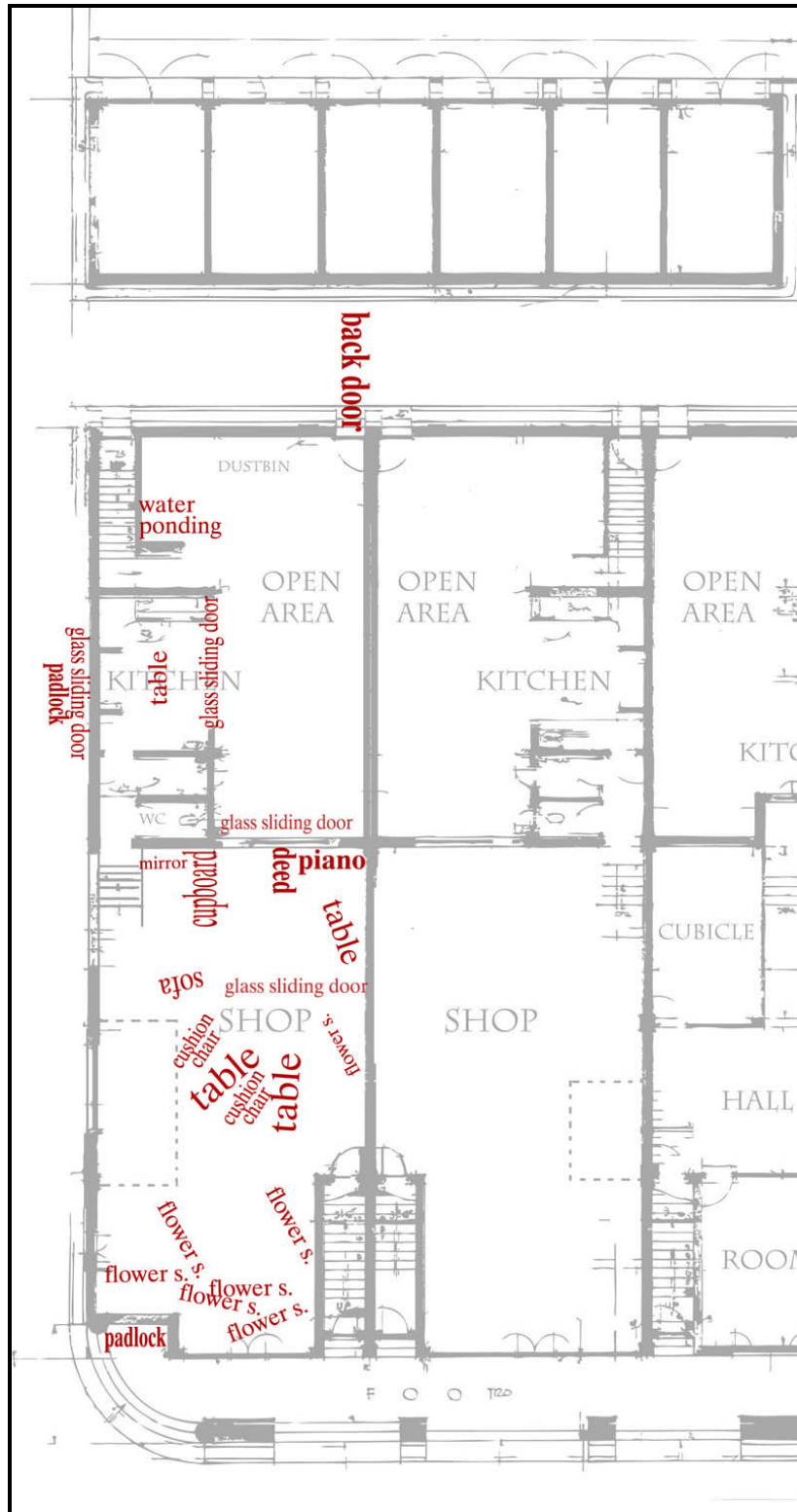
1. _____ agrees to let _____ agrees to take the at _____. From ____ of ____ 19____ for a period of _____ at the monthly rent of Singapore Dollars_____.

2. Not to take down, remove, or alter any fitting or furnishing first obtaining the written consent of the owner.

3. The owner may determine this tenancy and ... in the event of any portion of the rent.. reserved being in arrear for seven (7) days..

As witness the hands of the parties hereto of day... written

It was an unsigned house deed, resting beside a 1985 edition of the Straits Times newspaper. Being highly superstitious, I did not dare pick it up for the fear of being cursed.



25 Objects that I remembered seeing in the space. Hierarchy of words correspond to the size and placement of objects, where the bold words were items that were strikingly disturbing to me.

As the traces of hysteria are contained within this desolate unit, the history of the unit too, is confined within the walls. Perhaps, it is taboo to speak of its existence, for its association with the “dangerous, forbidden (and) unclean” made it a necessary thing to bury this ‘malady’ in the unit.¹¹¹ The unwillingness to speak of the unit stems from a deep-set fear that opposes social norm, for madness is conceivably a disorder that should rightfully belong in the asylum. Thus, the story of this unit remains uncovered although it was abandoned almost 25 years ago.

Taboo of a strangely familiar shop(house) – fear & hysteria in space

That flower shop was abandoned more than 10 years ago. I heard from some residents here that a wealthy lady who is connected to one of the big local banks in Singapore owns it.

Alvin Yeo¹¹²

Rather than the physical presence of ghastly images, the unit is burdened with a story – of madness – that most people would naturally shun. An abandoned unit speaks of crime and sordidness, of hysteria and the mystical. It guards its privacy by the tinted black glass, with rusty metal chains padlocked to forbid intruders from entering. When vacant,

¹¹¹ Michael G. Levine, ‘The Subject is Taboo’, in MLN Vol. 101 No. 5 Comparative Literature (The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), p.797.

¹¹² Email correspondence between author and Alvin Yeo (email dated 25 June 2009). He owns a blog <http://tiongbahruestate.blogspot.com/> and is a real estate agent for Tiong Bahru flats. He insisted that he could not verify the information given to me.

these spaces seem to amplify the act of intrusion and echo impending vulnerability. As I trudged within the boundaries of the empty unit, I was constantly aware of my visibility, for I was the trespasser of a forbidden space. *The sundry shop owner merely stated her lack of information as I probed her with questions about the vacant unit just adjacent to hers. She repeatedly stated that she had never seen anyone entering or leaving the place nor had she known any owners of the unit in her ten years running the shop.*¹¹³ *The resident cardboard collector, a distressed lady in her late 60s, chided me for approaching her with questions about the unit. She stated that I should not be spreading rumours about things that I did not know...* A strikingly similar reaction was portrayed by various people – the aroused suspicion about my curiosity and their reluctance to provide details about the house.

The unit is “out of time, but in space”.¹¹⁴ The whole composition of its interior is a vivid clash of everyday objects familiar that seem strangely unfamiliar. On plan, the unit appears to be a mirror image of its neighbouring unit, but what makes it distinctively different and disturbing are the objects within and their positioning. *What was a piano doing in the florist shop? -- the act of piano playing, a form of self expression and entertainment, contradicts the rational logics of a shop. The chair which probably sat the cashier was overturned. Why are there two lanterns hanging? What happened to the flowers? Why the use of black tinted glass for a shop?*

¹¹³ Interview with shopkeeper of “Choon Huat Store”, Block 66 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru, 20 July 2009.

¹¹⁴ Anthony Vidler, ‘The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary’, in *Warped space: art, architecture, and anxiety in modern culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c2000), p.105.

Identities of domestic objects – closets, tables, fan, windows, and toilets – are sometimes symbolically transfigured in the mind of each individual. This familiarity can sometimes suggest an alternative realm that taps on repressed desire or anxiety, establishing a setting which is displaced, fragmented and exaggerated. The psychological reaction to such spaces, as put forward by Anne Troutman, is conjured through experiences in “the locus of childhood insecurities and fears” which develop into “(an) adult’s concept of the nature and meaning of certain space types.”¹¹⁵ Our subconscious mind exaggerates and amplifies the innate fear we have of certain objects or settings. As Dora Epstein puts it, the particular manner in which one walks through a space is contributed by the fact that one continuously reacts to a particular “psychical reality” that is attributed to “rationalisations of unconscious desires” rather than rational perception.¹¹⁶ Thus, instead of assuming the neutrality of space, we tend to pick up signs that foretell the eccentric nature of space.

Hysteria is a “psychological conflict (that) is converted into bodily disturbance,” and its symptoms according to Freud, are “symbolic representations of a repressed unconscious event, accompanied by strong emotions could not be adequately expressed or discharged at the time”.¹¹⁷ Hysteria originates from the Greek term *hysterikos*, which points at the female womb and from the Greek notion that “hysteria was peculiar to women and caused by disturbance of the uterus”.¹¹⁸ It is a state of mind that results in a display of unmanageable fear and emotional excess. Unexplainable like the surrealist’s

¹¹⁵ Anne Troutman, ‘Inside Fear – Secret Places and Hidden Spaces in Dwellings’, in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. Nan Ellin (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997), p.151.

¹¹⁶ Dora Epstein, ‘Abject Terror: A Story of Fear, Sex, and Architecture’, in *Architecture of Fear*, p.134.

¹¹⁷ “Hysteria,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed., <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=112865097>. (accessed 6 August 2009).

¹¹⁸ “hysteria”. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary’. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hysteria> (accessed 6 August 2009).

depiction of a metaphysical state of mind, the image painted by hysteria is that of a mentally disturbed being, distorted and displaced. Likewise, this unspeakable fear that swept over me gave perhaps a glimpse into the mind of someone wrought with torment and hysteria; the meaning of space is contained in chanced orderliness of things. Troutman describes, “disturbing dreams and repressed fears transform surface into cavity, large into minute, the miniature into the overwhelming. These curious places become the refuge of the half-realized.”¹¹⁹ In the minds of the psychotic, the boundary between social and psychic space is disintegrated; voices that they hear resonate from an external space, from walls around them, from objects that are rightfully inanimate. The house then becomes a transitional space, one that occupies the domain “between reality and illusion”.¹²⁰

Perhaps, fear of *that* unit stems from taboo associations of the abandoned space compounded with its feminine associations to midwives and rumours about the lady florist gone mad. As each of us has a mental “cartography of avoidance”, we tend to craft for ourselves spaces, streets, buildings that we avoid.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Troutman, ‘Inside Fear’, p.145.

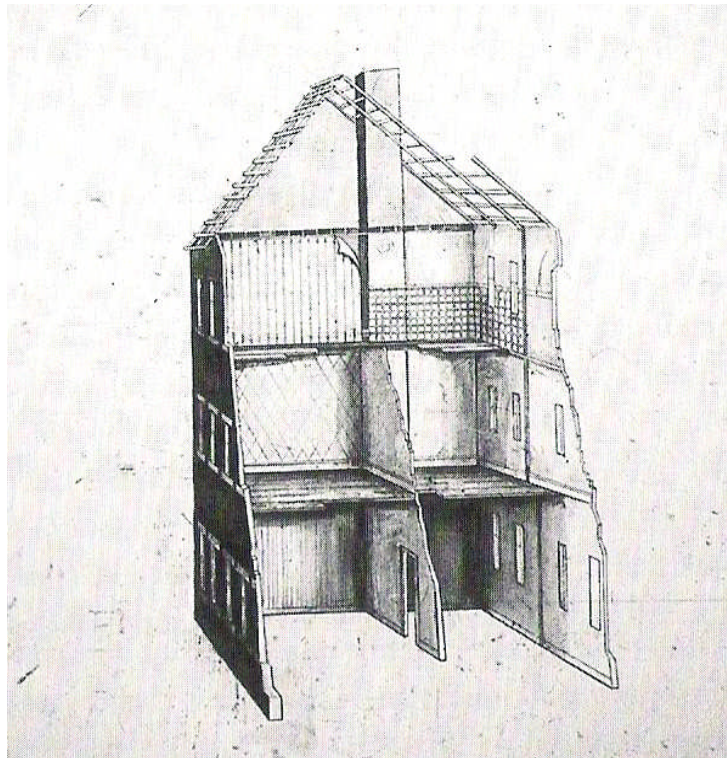
¹²⁰ Troutman, ‘Inside Fear’, p.149.

¹²¹ Epstein, ‘Abject Terror’, p.138.



26 Unit 01-30 of Block 66.

CONCLUSION



27

A building is a collection of opacities and transparencies,
a theatre of appearance and disappearance
in which we mask our presence or make it known.

- Karen Bermann, "The House Behind", in *Places Through the Body*, p.169.

... for as far as I can remember, the kitchen was once the place where my dad would boil his batik wax and do intricate line drawings with the tjantings, times when as a kid, I did not dare to venture to the kitchen to get a glass of water. The mango tree that sat in our front yard was a sheltered space for me to polish my dad's works or hold on to pieces of copper, bronze and stainless steel while he hammered away. That mango tree, too, once pillared my makeshift swing and bore juicy mangos which my mum would preserve in sugar-vinegar mixes. Our closet room doubled up as a painting studio when we ran out of working space...

I lived in a two- storey terrace house like many others around me in the neighbourhood. Yet in essence, it was a living-working-storing-experimenting-displaying 'house', each function preceded the other at any one point in time. And, not many people knew.

This passage illustrates the interpretation of architectural history related to a space; a space is never permanent, its recollection therefore is hardly generic. Behind humble facades lie spaces peppered with details of daily routines revealed only through anecdotes. These anecdotes provide alternative versions of a history if not more intimate depictions of space, as Kong and Yeoh emphasised, spatial history is ultimately tied to the complex interrelations between “individual constructions and shared narratives”.¹²² The domestic space is a permanent geography which defines the daily lives of its inhabitants, yet its interpretation is constantly changing and potentially fragile.

¹²² Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, ‘The Meanings and Making of Place: Exploring History, Community and Identity’, in *Portraits of places : history, community and identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Edition, c1995), p.17.

Through three separate subchapters that diverged into very different themes, I have attempted to translate these anecdotal fragments into spatial stories that can be read parallel to the recorded history. Each anecdote reveals different social contexts that challenge the normative perception of domesticity in modern Singapore. Also, each anecdote commands the cascading use of varying sources that highlighted the compounding relationship between anecdotes, historical documentation and physical evidences : 'house of torture' sifted out details of war crime trial accounts and oral history interviews that dealt with concrete evidences from historical records; 'den of beauties' relied on newspaper clippings and personal correspondences through online blogs that revealed journalistic strategy of storey-telling; and lastly, 'madwoman' involved more onsite detective work as well as interview with occupants in the vicinity, largely prescribing to physical evidences that allowed for people to react with the space. With this, I took the challenge of being the audience and narrator the SIT flat's alternative hi(story).

The study of the SIT flats, which are fundamentally mass housing prototypes duplicated across selected sites, revealed interesting twists in spatial perception when subjected to an overlay of stories, rumours, gossip. As Jon Bird puts it:

Simple objects reveal ambiguities that shift their identity and introduce an element of uncertainty. Invested with shared meanings – the functions of the body, familial experience, the patterns of everyday life – they are sufficiently strange to evade the closure that accompanies classification,

like a memory trace that hovers at the edge of recall, or the moment of waking when a dream image slips out of consciousness to leave a residue of uneasiness and intrigue.¹²³

¹²³ Jon Bird, 'Dolce Domum', in *House / Rachel Whiteread*, ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon, 1995), p.112.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Newspaper References

'161 Illegal Tenants Have Been Evicted From S.I.T. Flats', in *The Straits Times*, 11 May 1949, p.4.

'Court Hands Back Tea Money', in *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1948, p.7.

'Star-gazing in Tiong Bahru', in *The Straits Times*, 24 July 1948, p.9

Ken Jalleh, 'Tiong Bahru's No. 3 wives', in *Sunday Times*, 24 July 1949, p.8.

Freddy Bloom, 'The Present', in *The Straits Times*, 2 March 1950, p.11.

'Tenants who gave tea money told to quit flats', in *The Straits Times*, 23 February 1953, p.7.

'S.I.T. Flats? But They're Only For the Rich', in *The Straits Times*, 19 December 1953, p.9.

'The Lid Is Off Vice Hotels', in *The Sunday Times*, 14 September 1958, p.8.

Oral History References

Cheah, Charlie Fook Ying, 'Japanese Occupation of Singapore'. Interview by Low Lay Leng, 30 December 1983 in Oral History Unit. Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 000385.

Colonel (Retired) Tan Peng Ann, 'The Civil Service – A Retrospection'. Interview by Jason Lim, 7 August 2002 in Residence. Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 002659/14.

Tan Mok Lee, 'Special Project'. Interview by Thangaraju Ghalpanah, 26 July & 16 August 2002. Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, Accession No. 002674/5.

Trial Records, Interviews, Correspondence

Bashir A. Mallal (ed.), *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others* (Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Off., 1947).

Interview between author and resident of unit 01-05, Block 73 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru. 14 June 2009.

Interview between author and shopkeeper of "Choon Huat Store", Block 66 Eng Watt Street, Tiong Bahru. 20 July 2009.

Interview between author and owner of Hardware Store "Hong Eng Hin", 01-47, Block 71 Seng Poh Road, Tiong Bahru. 14 June 2009.

Email correspondence between author and Peter Chan, (email dated 22 April 2009), introduced through a blogger Mr Lam Chun See, <http://sgblogs.com/entry/tiong-cantonese-would-part-peter-chan/230163>.

Email correspondence between author and Alvin Yeo (email dated 25 June 2009). He owns a blog <http://tongbahruestate.blogspot.com/> and is a real estate agent for Tiong Bahru flats.

Secondary Sources

Literature References

Beamish, Jane and Ferguson, Jane, 'Period of Transition 1920-1940', *A History of Singapore Architecture: the making of a city* (Singapore: G. Brash, 1985).

Bird, Jon, 'Dolce Domum', James Lingwood (ed.), *House, Rachel Whiteread* (London: Phaidon, 1995).

Borden, Iain, Kerr, Joe, Pivaro, Alicia and Rendell, Jane 'Introduction: Narratives of Architecture in the City', Iain Borden (ed.), *Strangely Familiar: narratives of architecture in the city* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

Bordo, Susan, Klein, Binnie and Silverman, Marilyn K., 'Missing Kitchen', Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile, *Places through the body* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

Cheng, Seow Cheng, 'Singapore Improvement Trust and Pre-War Housing' (Department of History, National University of Singapore, 1995, unpublished thesis).

- Chew, Ernest C.T. and Lee, Edwin (eds.), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
- Ellin, Nan (ed.), *Architecture of Fear* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997).
- Epstein, Dora, 'Abject Terror: A Story of Fear, Sex, and Architecture', Nan Ellin (ed.), *Architecture of Fear* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997).
- Fraser, J.M., *The Work of The Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947* (Authority of Singapore Improvement Trust).
- Fuss, Diana and Sanders, Joel, 'Berggasse 19: Inside Freud's Office', Mark Taylor and Julieanna Preston (eds.), *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2006).
- Gallop, Jane, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
- G. Levine, Michael, 'The Subject is Taboo', *MLN* Vol. 101 No. 5 Comparative Literature (The John Hopkins University Press, 1986).
- Grossman, Lionel, 'Anecdote and History', in *History and Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (May, 2003), pp. 143-168.
- Heynen, Hilde, 'Modernity and domesticity', Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Baydar (eds.), *Negotiating Domesticity: spatial productions of gender in modern architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
- Hoigard, Cecilie and Liv Finstand, 'The Main Participants', *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money, and Love*, translated by Katherine Hanson, Nancy Sipe and Barbara Wilson (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).
- Karras, Ruth Mazo, *Common women: prostitution and sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- King, Peter, *Private Dwelling: speculations on the use of housing* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004).
- _____, *In dwelling, implacability, exclusion, and acceptance* (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, c 2008).
- Lane, Barbara Miller (ed.), *Housing and dwelling: perspectives on modern domestic architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- McLeod, Mary, 'Henri Lefebvre's Critique of Everyday Life: An Introduction', Deborah Berke and Steven Harris (eds.), *Architecture of the Everyday* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).

- Mirzoeff, Nicholas (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- Ooi, Jin-Bee and Chiang, Hai Ding (eds.), *Modern Singapore* (Singapore, University of Singapore, 1969).
- Pandey, Gyanendra, 'In Defence of the Fragment', *Routine Violence: nations, fragments, histories* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2006).
- Perec, George, *Life, a user's manual*, translated by David Bellos (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1987).
- Peter Marcuse, 'Walls of Fear and Walls of Support', Nan Ellin (ed.), *Architecture of Fear* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997).
- PuruShotam, Nirmal, 'Silent Witness: The 'Woman' in the Photograph', Chan Kwok Bun & Tong Chee Kiong (eds.), *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore* (Singapore Times Edition, 2003).
- Quah, Jon S.T. 'Administrative Reform and development administration in Singapore: a comparative study of the Singapore Improvement Trust and the Housing Development Board' (College of Social Science, Florida State University, 1975, unpublished thesis).
- Rendell, Jane, 'Bazaar Beauties or Pleasure Is Our Pursuit: A Spatial Story of Exchange', Iain Borden (ed.), *The Unknown City: contesting architecture and social space: a Strangely Familiar Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
- _____, 'Subjective Space: A Feminist Architectural History of the Burlington Arcade', Katerina Ruedi, Sarah Wigglesworth and Duncan McCorquodale (eds.), *Desiring Practices* (London: Black Dog Publication, 1996).
- _____, 'Introduction: Gender, Space, Architecture', Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden (eds.), *Gender space architecture: an interdisciplinary introduction* (Routledge, 2000).
- _____, 'Ramblers and Cyprians: Mobility, Visuality and the Gendering of Architectural Space', Louise Durning and Richard Wrigley (eds.), *Gender and Architecture* (New York: Wiley, 2000).
- Rogoff, Irit, 'Gossip As Testimony – a postmodern signature', Amelia Jones (ed.), *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- Singapore. Archives & Oral History Dept., *Chinatown: an album of a Singapore community* (Singapore: Times Books International: Archives and Oral History Dept., c1983).
- Siow, Jin Hua (ed.), *Syonan: Singapore under the Japanese 1942-1945* (Singapore Heritage Society, c1992).

- Taylor, Mark and Preston, Julieanna (eds.), *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2006).
- Teo, Siew-Eng and Savage, Victor, 'Singapore Landscape: A Historical Overview of Housing Image', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, v6 1985.
- Troutman, Anne, 'Inside Fear – Secret Places and Hidden Spaces in Dwellings', Nan Ellin (ed.), *Architecture of Fear* (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997).
- Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), *River Valley Planning Area Planning Report 1994* (Singapore: The Authority, 1994).
- Vidler, Anthony, 'The Explosion of Space: Architecture and the Filmic Imaginary', *Warped space: art, architecture, and anxiety in modern culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, c2000).
- Widodo, Johannes, 'Modernism in Singapore', *Modernism in Asia Pacific* (Paris: DOCOMOMO International Secretariat, 2003).
- Wise, J Macgregor, 'Home: Territory and Identity', Mark Taylor and Julieanna Preston (eds.), *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2006).
- Yeoh, Brenda S.A. and Lily Kong, 'The Meanings and Making of Place: Exploring History, Community and Identity', Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lily Kong (eds.), *Portraits of places : history, community and identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Edition, c1995).
-
- _____, 'Place-Making: Collective Representations of Social Life and Built Environment in Tiong Bahru', Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Lily Kong (eds.), *Portraits of places : history, community and identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Edition, c1995).
- Yung, Sai Shing and Chan, Kwok Bun, 'Leisure, Pleasure and Consumption: Ways of Entertaining Oneself', Chan Kwok Bun & Tong Chee Kiong, *Past Times: A Social History of Singapore* (Singapore Times Edition, 2003).

Online References

- 'Good Morning Yesterday' online blog owned by Lam Chun See
<http://sgblogs.com/entry/tiong-cantonese-would-part-peter-chan/230163> (accessed 19 April 2009).
- 'Tiong Bahru Estate' online blog owned by Alvin Yeo
<http://tiongbahruestate.blogspot.com/> (first accessed 19 April 2009).

'Tiong Bahru Home & Friends' online blog
<http://tiongbahruheritageandfriends.blogspot.com/> (first accessed 21 April 2009).

'Great World Amusement Park', http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_1046_2006-06-09.html (accessed 1 August 2009).

'Double Tenth Incident', http://infopedia.nl.sg/articles/SIP_111_2005-01-06.html (accessed 12 July 2009).

"hysteria" in 'The Columbia Encyclopedia', 6th ed.,
<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=112865097>. (accessed 6 Aug 2009)

"hysteria". 'Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary'. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hysteria> (accessed 6 August 2009).

"claustrophobia". Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/claustrophobia>. (accessed 7 September 2009).

'Junction of Smith Street and New Bridge Road', <http://sgblogs.com/entry/second-shot-junction-smith-street-bridge-road/258505> (accessed 3 June 2009)

SUNDAY TIMES PAGE 8

Tiong Bahru's No. 3 wives

by KEN JALLEH

IT was a Sunday, about 11 p.m., a few years before the war. Night was a black mantle over the new satellite area of Tiong Bahru in Singapore with its blocks of newly-painted fresh-looking flats.

A sleek limousine wound its way along the main road, noiselessly, a shiny moving spectre in the dark night. In the limousine was a lone passenger—a fat, rich Chinese merchant.

Every Sunday night, about this time, ever since he acquired an Improvement Trust flat in Tiong Bahru, the merchant had made his journey along the main road to his new home.

There were many others like him who visited Tiong Bahru when night fell. Some came on Mondays, some on Wednesdays, but most of them, in their sleek, expensive cars, came to Tiong Bahru on Saturdays and Sundays. Perhaps they preferred the night—daylight might unmask their identities.

Near a flight of stairs at the end of the road, the car stopped and the merchant stepped out. He went up the stairs and at the top of the first flight, knocked on a door on the right.

Through a tiny peephole, a little maid-servant looked out—and without hesitation let the merchant in. She knew him. This was Sunday—and on Sundays he always came to visit his third wife.

WIFE No. 3 was waiting for him. Eleven o'clock was his usual time and he was punctual.

The merchant had married his third wife three years earlier after a short but hectic romance which began in a cabaret and ended at a big Chinese dinner to celebrate the occasion of the wedding.

She lived in a flat in Tiong Bahru, with her maid-servant and an elderly cook. She did not love the merchant—he was fat, clumsily dressed, with piggy cheeks and gold teeth. But he provided for her generously—and well, as long as she had a comfortable flat to live in, plenty of money why worry about love?

She knew the merchant had two other wives. One lived in a bungalow in Kalong and another lived nearby in Bukit Pasoh Road. She hated them, and she was content to live by herself in Tiong Bahru.

In the daytime she played mahjong; there were other third wives in the neighbourhood who had plenty of money to gamble with. The stakes were high and always she lost—but why worry, there was always more money to come.

At night she supplemented her income by working in a nearby cabaret. Except of course, on Sunday nights.

She liked dancing and it helped keep her figure slim and attractive. She had to go to live in the flat as the merchant's third wife. There were many other women who would take him, fat and ugly as he was, the moment he waved his dollar notes.

THE Singapore Improvement Trust built the Tiong Bahru flats to house Singapore's army of white-collared workers and they

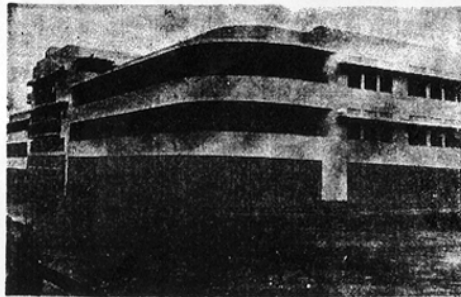
The scene changed slightly during the Occupation. Many merchants, bankrupt with the entry of the Japanese, deserted their third wives. Many flats were vacated, and a new type of people moved into the area.

Profiteering in Trust properties grew. Many tenants "sold" their flats for thousands of dollars in "banana" money. Others converted their flats into miniature lodging houses, sub-letting every available inch of space.

AFTER the liberation, an all-out drive to eject unauthorized tenants was made by the Improvement Trust. By May 1946, a total of 161 tenancies, found irregular, were corrected.

But a few third wives retained possession of their flats. They had retained tenancy during the Occupation and as they were the registered pre-war tenants, there was nothing that could be done to eject them.

There are still some limousines to be seen sliding through the area after night-fall. But with the acute



24 July 1949

SUNDAY JULY 24

A CORNER of the Singapore Improvement Trust flats at Tiong Bahru shortly after completion.

housing shortage, and the influx of hundreds of families into the Trust flats, the area has become today a respectable, thriving residential centre.

During the Occupation, large number of flats changed hands. After the liberation, the tenants were accepted by the B.M.A. regiments as authorized tenants who had obtained the premises under the Japanese Government.

These amounted to about 40 per cent of the tenants in Tiong Bahru. Many who had "sold" their flats and tried to regain them lost their tenancies.

THE picture today in Tiong Bahru is one of a thriving town within a town. About 14,000 people live in the area and there are thousands more eager to move in and willing, if they can, to pay any amount of tea-money to get possession of a flat.

Between 1936 and 1941 the Improvement Trust built 784 flats, 84 tenements and 33 shops. After the war, 64 self-contained flats became ready in March 1948 to house 500 people.

About ten grocery shops and a small market feed the people. There are also bookshops, a maternity home, sports shops, tailors, shoe shops, coffee shops and restaurants.

A Chinese bus service meets the transport problem of the people of Tiong Bahru, picking them up from their very doorsteps. An elected

Community Welfare Council plans the recreation and social activities of the people.

The Trust controls the tenants through two district supervisors who make their routine checks on the flats; but many are of the opinion that the Trust is not strict enough in its vigilance.

A few wealthy merchants and/or their wives still occupy the flats, while thousands of wage-earners, living in over-crowded and miserable circumstances in the slums of Singapore, test in vain at what they call a "glaring injustice."

161 Illegal Tenants Have Been Evicted From S.I.T. Flats

ILLEGAL tenancies of Singapore Improvement Trust flats at Tiong Bahru, some of them dating back to the Japanese occupation, have now been ended.

There were 161 tenancies found to be irregular and corrected, says Mr. W. L. Blythe, chairman of the Trust.

Since 1946, action has been taken to investigate occupiers and where it has been proved satisfactorily that they obtained illegal possession, action has been taken for their eviction.

Mr. Blythe's statement has just been given to Inche Sardon bin Jubir (Rural East) in reply to questions tabled by him in the Legislative Council on Mar. 15.

In one of the questions Inche Sardon asked how many "alum dwellers" were now occupying these flats and who were the other occupiers.

"To Attract People"

Mr. Blythe replies that it is not possible to say how many of the present tenants of Tiong Bahru flats were originally "alum dwellers."

The Tiong Bahru flats were not occupied by families from any particular alum area. These flats were built to attract people from densely populated areas into decent buildings. This policy was carried out up to the Japanese occupation.

Approximately 40 per cent of the tenancies of the Tiong Bahru flats are of Japanese origin, Mr. Blythe states.

Ken Jalleh, 'Tiong Bahru's No. 3 wives', in *Sunday Times*, 24 July 1949, p.8.

'161 Illegal Tenants Have Been Evicted From S.I.T. Flats', in *The Straits Times*, 11 May 1949, p.4.

COURT HANDS BACK "TEA MONEY"

First Case Under 1922 Ordinance

"TEA money" of \$1,000 paid by a woman for a Singapore Improvement Trust flat at Tiong Bahru was handed back to her in the First District Court yesterday by order of the Judge (Mr. E. P. Shanks).

The conviction is the first under the Premium on Leases Ordinance, which came into force in 1922.

Henry Wong, of 2, Balmoral Crescent, the man who demanded the money, was fined \$200, in default, six weeks' rigorous imprisonment, for failing to report to the Municipality that he had received "tea money," an offence under the Premium on Leases Ordinance.

Mr. Shanks said the practice of demanding "tea money" would never be stopped until the victims came forward and reported.

"Some people may feel the money is paid and gone and there is no need to bother about it."

"Such people are foolish," said Mr. Shanks, "because they can have their money back if they report."

Singapore Improvement Trust Estates Officer (Mr. H. S. Tinsley) said he received information in March this year that part of 85, Seng Poh Road, an Improvement Trust flat, had been sub-let.

Mr. Tinsley sent a notice to Henry Wong, who was registered as tenant of 83, Seng Poh Road.

Woman Tenant

Mary Fong, a woman, appeared in Mr. Tinsley's office, saying she was the tenant.

She produced two receipts, each for \$500, signed by Wong, and a letter written by Henry Wong.

Mr. Tinsley then called in the police.

Mary Fong said she paid Henry Wong \$500 on Nov. 8, 1945, and another \$500 the next day for vacant possession of the flat.

It was "tea money" and she moved into the flat a few days after paying it.

Mr. C. J. Koh, who appeared for the defence, submitted he had no case to meet.

He argued that the Premium on Leases Ordinance, under which his client was charged, was not in operation in 1945.

Mr. Koh did not call Henry Wong to the witness-box. A.S.P. Mr. P. S. Gordon prosecuted.

Page 9

S.I.T. FLATS? BUT THEY'RE ONLY FOR THE RICH

Says man in 'condemned' house

A MAN living in a dilapidated, "condemned" outhouse in Victoria Street told a Singapore Court yesterday that he had refused accommodation offered by the Singapore Improvement Trust.

The man, Ngo Nam Seng, was charged in the City Police Court yesterday with unlawful occupation of Crown land on which his outhouse stands.

Ngo said: "I must thank the S.I.T. for offering me such a nice house, but I can't afford to live in the Tiong Bahru flats which only the rich can afford."

He added he would be very happy with a home in the squatter area.

The Land Office prosecutor said that Ngo's outhouse had been condemned as unsafe and unfit to live in by the P.W.D. authorities.

Mr. J. M. Devereux-Colebourne, the magistrate, issued a warrant of dispossession.

He told Ngo to see the S.I.T. again. They might be able to give him other accommodation.

Rise in rent is unjust, they claim

MR. JUSTICE Taylor reserved judgment in the Singapore High Court yesterday in an application by Messrs. Laycock and Ong, tenants of Nos. 2 to 10 ground floor Nunes Building, that an order of the Rent Conciliation Board raising the monthly rent of the premises in September last be set aside or varied.

Dr. C. H. Withers-Payne, for Laycock and Ong, submitted that there was no good or sufficient evidence upon which the board could come to the conclusion that \$986 per month was a reasonable rent for the premises.

The Board had increased the rent from \$688 to \$986 a month.

Mr. C. L. Duff, for the landlords, the Portuguese Mission, said the increase was reasonable.

'Court Hands Back "Tea Money"', in *The Straits Times*, 15 July 1948, p.7.

'S.I.T. Flats? But They're Only For the Rich', in *The Straits Times*, 19 December 1953, p.9.

Star-gazing in Tiong Bahru

MUCH publicity has been given in the Press to the fact that a tenant of an Improvement Trust flat turned his premises into a brothel. Another tenant was discovered who had obtained occupation on payment of \$1,000 "tea money" to the original registered tenant.

These are but two isolated cases we have heard of officially and it is not unreasonable to presume that there must be many more illegal tenants.

This state of affairs is not surprising considering the fact that the majority of wage earners, or those who are genuinely in need of accommodation, are debarred from enjoying the benefit of Trust premises by reason of the high rent charged.

Many families must of necessity turn to humbler shelters, no matter how insanitary, or accept artisans' huts as an alternative.

Here one has to pay a rent of \$20, with no facilities for light and water.

Water is free to the tenant of an artisan's hut, but it is only obtainable from a communal stand pipe. A water carrier charges 20 cents for four kerosene tins (approximately 16 gallons) to fetch water to the house. This coupled with the high cost of oil tells heavily on a poor man's budget.

Why these two essential amenities of modern living are not installed in these premises is difficult to understand.

I applied to the Trust for accommodation a long long time ago. My family total

eight. I was bombed out during the war, in which I served as a Deputy Senior Warden. At present I am imposing my family on a defenceless relative whose small house of one room I have invaded.

It now shelters 17 persons, sleeping in this order: 10 persons in a single room approximately 12' x 15' of whom five are children, four persons in a small hall, one in a narrow passage, while I have the whole sanctum of the kitchen to myself, including all the smells from the larder, bathroom and lavatory.

My only consolation is that I enjoy a camp-bed view of the stars, to the music of mosquitoes or curl myself up, in the fashion of the housecat, when it rains—and the flies wake me up with the first light of dawn.

Up to the present I.O. "Trust Inspector" has yet been sent round to investigate my case, but I suppose I must not be discouraged since I am still in possession of a registration number from the Singapore Improvement Trust signed by the Manager.

I have learnt one thing and that is the name of one of the stars I see of a clear night lying in my camp-bed.

ARIES.

Singapore.

Operators use scouts, alarm bells
to warn them of police raids

THE LID IS OFF VICE HOTELS

THE lid on vice in Singapore has been lifted. And laid bare for the first time is the full story of how this city's more shady hotels cater to the prostitute and her client. Five men and a woman—members of the Hotels' Licensing Board—have revealed the facts. They are an amazing documentation of the ingenuity vice operators have shown in trying to outwit the Anti-Vice branch of the C.I.D.

By T. F. HWANG

It is a degrading story in which men and women have collaborated shamelessly to gain by the weaknesses of others. It tells in nauseating detail how ostensibly respectable men, sometimes with wives and children, have lived in secret for years on the earnings of prostitutes.

It came to light after the Licensing Board began clamping down on the vice dens which have for years flourished in this Colony.

As a result, 12 so-called hotels have been struck off the registration list. Eleven others are under surveillance. One wrong move and they too will cease to exist.

Who are the men who operate these slime houses? A well-informed source told the board that once they were tramps, rascals, owners and hangers.

These men hoarded their earnings. Then they splurged them on the "hotel business". Tens of thousands of dollars are said to have been spent in this pandering to illicit sex.

Pre-war homes

The men, the board was told, employ a variety of artifices in keeping the true nature of their businesses from the police.

Most of the vice hotels before the war were private homes. That means they are so built the women and their clients have a strong chance of beating surprise police raids.

The hoteliers place scouts at strategic points in and around the building. A signal that the police have

often in a state of undress. Sometimes they are found hiding in toilets. But when they can get quickly enough into their clothes they mingle with the crowd that invariably collects at such a time and so escape detection.

In one hotel bordering the sea, "guests" at raid time, have plunged into the water, giving the impression they are enjoying a night-time swim. In most of these cases they are certainly "dressed" for the part.

Sure pointer

Under the law, all hotels are supposed to register their residents. The register is a sure finger-pointer to a prostitute, for it often shows a woman registering at various hotels with a variety of men.

But sometimes these registers are not maintained as they should be. Police raiding parties, finding unguarded "guests" have acted swiftly. The hotel's employees were hauled into court. A first offender found himself facing a \$1,000 fine.

This year two men were jailed after they were found guilty of living on the earnings of prostitutes residing in hotels.

Police, in both cases, acted on information given by the women themselves. One woman had come to Singapore from Kampar,

Perak. The other was a Singapore girl.

Teenage girls sometimes have been rescued from the sordidness of these vice establishments. One girl, sent to a Social Welfare home, escaped and returned to her hotel. It was not long before the police detained her a second time.

Official documents have been given to the board listing people who have contracted V. D. at these hotels.

The papers make alarming reading.

The Hotels' Licensing Board has not off to a good start in ridding Singapore of a post-war scourge. But it is only a beginning. A lot more work lies ahead.

Plea for new holiday

The Hindu and Sikh communities in Singapore want the Government to declare their New Year's Day which falls on April 13 every year a public holiday.

A meeting of the Hindu and Sikh New Year committee will be held in the Victoria Memorial Hall on Oct. 2 at 2.30 p.m.

Representatives of Hindu and Sikh organisations wishing to attend the meeting should contact Mr. G. M. K. Bahai at 18, Telok Ayer St.

Singapore's Zaiton in

'Star-gazing in Tiong Bahru', in *The Straits Times*, 24 July 1948, p.9

'The Lid Is Off Vice Hotels', in *The Sunday Times*, 14 September 1958, p.8.

Affidavit of Mr. W.T.Cherry.

Source: Bashir A. Mallal (ed.), *The Double Tenth Trial, War Crimes Court, in re Lt.-Col. Sumida Haruzo and 20 others*, (Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Off., 1947), pp. 627-30.

I, Wiliam Thorpe Cherry, Government Printer in Singapore with permanent home address at Wistaria, Four Narks, Alton, Hanks, make oath and says as follows: --

1. I was in Singapore at the time of the capitulation of the British forces to the Japanese in February 1942. At the time of the capitulation I was in the auxiliary fire service and was kept interned in the Central Fire Station until 6th April 1942. I was then sent to Changi prison where the rest of the civilian internees were kept. I stayed there until 16th October 1943. On that date the Bishop of Singapore and myself were taken without any explanation being given, to the Y.M.C.A. which was the headquarters of the Japanese Military Police for Signapore island. We arrived there at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the Bishop was taken away and put in a cell and I was made to sit on the floor alongside the sergeant's desk in the lock-up room. My shoes, false teeth and spectacles were taken away from me.

2. Half an hour later a member of the Japanese Kempei Tai took me to a small room. I can identify this man as number 30 on the folio of photographs marked Exhibit "A" and attached to this affidavit. He had with him an interpreter and two strong men who were professional beaters-up. Once in the room I was made to sit cross-legged and in front of me sat No.30 and the interpreter, and behind me were the two strong men. Then No. 30 accused me of being No. 1 spy in Malaya and I was charged generally with espionage. This I denied. The interrogation then proceeded by my being beaten by the two toughs who stood behind me with a handful of loose ropes and bamboo poles. I was also punched and slapped throughout the proceedings. This went on until 9pm. At 9pm I was taken to another room where I asked a soldier for a cup of water which he brought me. By this time my mouth and nose was bleeding and my eyes were almost shut and I had been refused a drink throughout the interrogation. Then at half past 9 No.30 came to see me again bringing with him a Private. He took me to Smith Street which was a detention barracks where the Kempei Tai did most of their interrogating and torturing. Once there I was thrown into a cell with Dr. Johns. Perry, and about six others. We just had to lie on the wooden floor, there was no blankets or palliases provided, our food was just plain rice.

3. I stayed there until the night of 23rd October 1943, and then I was put into another cell opposite the 24 other people. The following morning 24th October, I was taken to the Central Police Station. I was there for 3 days when No.30 appeared again and brought me back to Smith Street at 3 o'clock in the afternoon for my big interrogation. They accused me then of spy activities. I denied once more having anything to do with spy activities and told them what I had been doing in Singapore

during my stay there. Then they began torturing me. The interrogation and torturing went on for about 14 hours. The torturing took the form of electric shocks. No.30 plugged a lead into the mains and touched my bare back with the exposed ends of the wire and put about 230volts through me. The shock threw me about 15 feet across the room from a sitting position. Another form of torture was to put a pole behind my knees and make me kneel on the floor with my insteps as flat on the ground as possible. They then jumped on my heels forcing my feet flat. They also sat on my shoulders and bounced up and down on me, and sometimes one of them would balance on the pole behind me and wobble it. Another form of torture was when I was in the same kneeling position they tied a rope to my wrists with my arms behind my back and attached the rope to a pulley in the ceiling and then pulled on it forcing me forward, then one of the toughs would jump on my shoulders again forcing me back against the pull of the rope.

4. A favourite trick of No.30's was to burn my thighs with the end of a cigar, I still have the scars on me. During the same interrogation I was made to drink enormous quantities of water, I then had to lie on my back on the ground and somebody jumped on my stomach,

5. At 5 o'clock in the morning they had finished with me and I was carried back to Central Police Station.

6. After that date my memory is a little vague as to exactly what happened to me in detail but I was taken back to Smith Street detention barracks on 13 occasions for big interrogations which lasted many hours and during which time I went through other forms of torture and never suffered anything less than terrible beatings. All the time I was still pressed with being a spy. On these occasions, No.30 was the principal interrogator.

7. On the 17th December I was taken back to Smith Street once again this time for the mock execution which was conducted by No.81 in the folio (Exhibition "A"). I was taken into the yard, blindfolded and put against a wall. I then heard No.81 giving orders to the executing squad which consisted of 6 men. I heard them working their bolts as if they were loading their rifles. No.81 then came up to me and asked me if I had anything more to say and I said "Nothing". Then followed further discussions between him and the other officers of the Kempei Tai staff. Then No.81 came up to me and said the execution would be postponed until the next day and I was given a paper and pencil to write to my mother, I was then put into Smith Street barracks and nothing happened except for further questioning.

8. In my cell in Smith Street, which measured 6'6" by 7'6" there was Dr. Cecily Williams, a man called Jackson and a Chinese. The four of us shared this minute cell which had wooden floors with a stone slab on it on which was a pedestal W.C. connected to the mains. This W.C. provided the only water we ever got, in which we washed ourselves and used for drinking as well as having use it for the usual purposes. I stayed there until 1st April 1944 when I was then taken back to the Y.M.C.A.

9. With regard to other personalities of the Kempei Tai apart from No.30 and 81, I can identify the following people I have seen in the Y.M.C.A., Smith Street Detention Barracks and the Central Police Station:- Numbers 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 19, 36, 20, 31, 32, 58, 67, 84 (accused 18, 14, 12, 13, 10, 1) So far as I was concerned none of these Kempei Tai tortured me, though at one time or another most of them kicked or hit me with their fists. No.84 I do know as Lieut-Colonel Sumida who was the commissioned officer in charge of the Kempei Tai branch in Singapore. No.81 who conducted the mock execution on me was the third in command of the Kempei Tai.

10. I left the Y.M.C.A. on 5th May and was transferred to the Military section of the Outram Road Gaol. I suffered ill-treatment there, then on 24th October I was moved to Sime Road Internment Camp hospital. By this time I was suffering from beri-beri, dysentery and malnutrition and was hardly able to move. At one time I was unconscious for 8 days. At the end of hostilities I was still in a very bad physical condition and was just able to get around using sticks. On 15th September, I got on board ship for England. When I arrived back at this country I went straight to hospital in Southampton for 10 days and ever since then I have had to have daily treatment to try and get me back to health again. Even so my legs are still weak and I am expecting to be X-Rayed in a day or two. All this is a result of the ill-treatment which I received while in the hands of the Kempei Tai,